

THE SKY
AND THE FOREST

Books by
C. S. FORESTER



Novels

PAYMENT DEFERRED
BROWN ON RESOLUTION
PLAIN MURDER
DEATH TO THE FRENCH
THE GUN
THE PEACEMAKER
THE GENERAL
THE HAPPY RETURN
A SHIP OF THE LINE
FLYING COLOURS
THE EARTHLY PARADISE
THE CAPTAIN FROM CONNECTICUT
THE SHIP
THE COMMODORE
LORD HORNBLOWER

Omnibus

CAPTAIN HORNBLOWER, R.N.



Travel

THE VOYAGE OF THE 'ANNIE MARBLE'
THE 'ANNIE MARBLE' IN GERMANY



Biography

NELSON



Plays

U.97
NURSE CAVELL
(with C. E. Bechofer Roberts)



Miscellaneous

MARIONETTES AT HOME

C. S. FORESTER



The Sky
and The Forest



London
MICHAEL JOSEPH

First published by
MICHAEL JOSEPH LTD.
26 Bloomsbury Street
London W.C.1
1918

*Set and Printed in Great Britain by Tonbridge
Printers, Ltd., Peach Hall Works, Tonbridge,
in Times nine on eleven point, and bound by
James Burn.*

CHAPTER

1

THERE HAD BEEN MUCH RAIN DURING THE NIGHT, AND THE MORNING air was still saturated with moisture, heavy and oppressive, and yet with a suspicion of chill about it, enough to make flies sluggish and men and women slow in their movements. But now the sun was able to look over the tops of the trees into the town, calling out the wreaths of steam from the puddles, and shining down upon Loa's woolly head as he walked out into the west end of the street. Four women, not yet gone to the banana groves, ceased their chattering at his appearance and fell on their knees and elbows, pressing their noses against the muddy soil. Loa ran his eye over them as he walked past them; he was more used to seeing the backs of men and of women than to looking into their faces. A little boy came running round the corner of a house—he was of an age when running was still something of a new experience for him—and stopped at sight of the crouching women and of Loa's passing majesty. His finger went to his mouth, but it had hardly reached it when his mother put out her arm, without lifting her face from the earth, and seized him and flung him down, face downwards as was proper, holding him there despite his struggles, and when he had recovered his surprise sufficiently to wail in protest, she managed to get her hand over his mouth and moderate the noise. That was right.

The distraction was sufficient to turn Loa from continuing his way down the street. He stood and looked idly along to the far end. The crouching women, conscious that he was remaining near them, writhed in troubled ecstasy, the bunched muscles along their backs standing out tensely, while their concern communicated itself to the little boy so that he ceased to struggle and wail, and instead lay limp and submissive. The sun was shining brightly into Loa's eyes, but the sun was Loa's brother and did not need to avert his face

and grovel in his presence. Loa raised his left hand—the one that held his leafy fan—to shade his eyes as he gazed down the street. He did not know what he was looking for nor why he was doing this, and the realization did not come to him even when he had made certain that nothing was different from usual; actually it was an unrecognized feeling of unrest which had stirred a faint desire that to-day something should be different. Loa could not analyse nor recognize his emotions. He was a god, and always had been.

His brother the sun had now come tardily to recognize the fact, as he sometimes did, and had drawn a veil of dilatory cloud over his face. The tribute was gratifying, and Loa did not need to shade his eyes any longer.

‘Ha!’ he said, pleased with his power, and he turned, immense in his dignity, and walked back to his house at the end of the street.

Indeharu and Vira made a half circle so as to keep behind him and followed him back, as they had followed him out. Indcharu’s back was bent with age, but even if it had not been he would have bent it and walked with a stoop, just as did young Vira; it was right and proper to walk with humility when attending upon the god. Loa was free for the moment of the unrest which had manifested itself earlier. His right hand swung his iron battle-axe, and his iron collars and bracelets jangled as he strode along, his naked toes gripping the thin and drying mud of the street. Lanu was playing in the small open space in front of Loa’s house and came running up with a smile; Lanu could face the god, for Lanu was a god too, Loa’s child. There were other children, with their mothers in the banana groves or behind the house, but they were not gods. Lanu was the firstborn. Although that was not why he was a god, it was probably the reason why Loa had been fond of him at his birth, before the birth of children became a commonplace, and had played with him and petted him and treated him with so much condescension and fondness that clearly he could not be a mortal who must abase himself in the god’s presence, and consequently he had never been trained into abasement.

Loa dropped his battle-axe and fan, and caught Lanu under the armpits and swung him up into the air kicking and squaling with delight, holding him there for long pleasurable seconds before setting him on his feet again. Loa unclasped his leopard skin from about

his throat and put it over the boy's shoulders, to Lanu's immense pleasure. The boy clasped the forelegs round his neck with the brooch, draped the skin over his left shoulder, and strutted off, very pleased with himself, while Loa followed him fondly with his gaze. Even a god could love his son.

Loa picked up his battle-axe and fan, and seated himself on his stool; the latter was made merely of three curving branches, polished, and bound together with cane fibre into a distorted tripod. To sit on it at all called for a careful placing of the fleshy parts; to sit on it for long called for constant shifting of them, but it was more dignified than squatting on one's heels—that was what men and women did—and the stool by raising the body above the ground kept it out of the way of ants and other creeping creatures. Indcharu and Vira squatted before him, and Loa swept the flies from himself with his fan and prepared himself to listen to their morning report.

'Uledi dies,' said Vira; as much the younger man it was his place to speak first.

'She dies?' asked Loa.

'She does indeed. Now her head is drawn back. There is foam on her lips. Every hour the poison shakes her. Her arms and legs go stiff as she struggles with it, stiff like tree trunks, although she tosses about in her battle with the poison, and she cries out with words that mean nothing. Then once more she ceases to struggle, and lies sleeping again. She has slept since last there was yellow water in the river.'

'I know that,' said Loa.

'There is no flesh on her bones, and now there are sores on her skin.'

'Yes,' said Loa, rubbing his chin.

This trouble was not infrequent in the town. For no apparent reason some individual, man, woman, or child, would suddenly become somnolent, sleeping continuously except when roused to take food. Sometimes they slept themselves straight into death; sometimes, as in Uledi's case, they died more violently, but whichever way it was they died once they began to sleep, sometimes in a short time, sometimes in a long time.

'It is a deadly poison,' commented Indcharu

'Yes,' said Loa again.

Life could not end except by human agency. Somebody must be poisoning Uledi, and Loa's heavy face was contorted into a frown as he wrestled with the problem. Face after face flitted across the field of his mental vision, but not one seemed to be connected with the poisoning of Uledi. Soon he abandoned his review of the population of the town. Seven hundred people lived in it; he did not know how many, nor did his language contain words for the numeral, but he knew it would take too long to think about every one of them. The bones, the five slender rib bones which lay in his house, would tell him if he asked them.

'Soli is her mother's brother's son,' said Vira.

That was a very special relationship, conferring particular privileges in the matter of inheritance, and might supply a motive. Loa for a moment thought the problem solved, but Vira and Indeharu were not looking at each other, and his instincts, the sensitive instincts of an uneducated man, told him there was something suspicious in the atmosphere. He did not have to follow along the path of deduction and logic, from the fact that Indeharu and Vira were carefully refraining from exchanging glances, to the fact that their expressions were unnaturally composed, and then on to the fact that Vira bore an old grudge against Soli—something to do with a haunch of goat over which they had quarrelled—and from that to his knowledge of Indeharu's enmity towards Soli. It had never even occurred to him that this enmity issued from the old man's fear of a possible young rival. Loa's instincts leaped all the gaps, without any painful building of bridges, and warned him that he, he, the god, was being subjected to influence, an indirect influence and therefore one to be suspected.

'Soli is Uledi's mother's brother's son,' he said, his voice as expressionless as the other's features. 'We know that, then.'

The slight discomposure apparent in the faces of his two councillors told him that his instincts had been right; Indeharu and Vira were disappointed. He was confirmed in his decision to take no immediate action against Soli.

'The men are felling more trees,' said Indeharu, changing the subject, and pointing into the forest towards the area where the tree felling was in progress.

'They may do so,' said Loa. As far back as his memory could go—

Loa had been king and god since he was a little boy younger than Lanu—Indeharu had managed the economic details of the town's life satisfactorily. A forest tract had to be cleared two years in advance of the time when the plantain crop sown in the clearing began to fruit, and it was a prodigious effort to make such plans. Loa never troubled himself with them. Yet thinking about the plantain crop reminded him he was hungry, and he raised his voice.

'Musini!' he called. 'Bring me food.'

'I hear you,' replied Musini from behind the house; she had a shrill voice with an edge to it.

'When the trees are down,' went on Indeharu, 'Tolo will build a house. His father Linisinu and his father's brothers will help him.'

'Where will the house be?' asked Loa, and as Indeharu began to reply Musini came with her wooden bowl of food.

Loa looked at the contents with disappointment.

'Baked plantain!' he said, disgustedly.

'Baked plantain with oil. Precious oil,' said Musini, sharply. There was never enough oil in the town, the oil palms being too sparing of their produce. 'I have eaten no oil since the moon was full last. The oil is all for you.'

Loa put down his battle-axe and fan, took the bowl, and transferred a handful of the plantain soaked in oil to his mouth.

'Is it not good?' demanded Musini, aggressively. 'What better food can I provide for you than baked plantain and oil? Is it the heart of an elephant you would like? Or a savoury dish of the tripe of a young goat? When last was an elephant killed? No goat has borne a kid for two months.'

'Say no more,' said Loa, irritated. He had eaten elephant only three or four times in his twenty-five years of life; goat's tripe was perhaps his favourite dish, and Musini touched him on the raw by mentioning it—which was what she planned to do, being a bad-tempered shrew.

'Say no more!' she quoted back at him. 'Say no more! Then say no more when I bring you rich red oil upon your baked plantains. Say no more until an antelope is caught and we eat the roast flesh!'

'Be silent, woman!' shouted Loa, beside himself with rage. The thought of roast antelope was almost more than he could bear. He was on his feet now, brandishing the wooden bowl and actually

dancing with passion. Musini saw the look in his face and was frightened.

'Your servant is silent,' she said hastily, and turned to go. Yet even then before she was out of earshot she was grumbling again.

Musini was Lanu's mother, Loa's first and chief wife, and had been associated with Loa since his childhood. She did not prostrate herself before him except on occasions of high ceremonial, because little by little through the years ceremony between the two of them had lapsed as a matter of practical convenience. But her habit of scolding at Loa, of goading him to exasperation, had another origin. She wanted to assert herself, and she felt as if she did not want to live if she did not. She infuriated Loa as a means of self-expression, as an artist paints or a musician composes. Besides, she was drawn to this course of action by a subtle lure, by the indescribable temptation of danger. She risked her life every time she angered Loa. There was a fearful pleasure in coming as near to destruction as possible and then withdrawing just in time. Shuddering fear tempted her like a drug.

Loa took another mouthful of baked plantain with growing distaste, his mind running on devious tracks. That unrest which had set him gazing down the street, which had brought him to his feet at Musini's gibe, was a symptom - although he did not express it so to himself - of his hunger for meat, rich meat, full of proteins and fats and mineral salts. The African forest was niggardly of its meat supply, of all the animals domesticated by man the goat was the only one able to live there, and even the goat did not thrive, a high mortality among the town's herd made goat's flesh a rarity. The plantain was the staple food, which ironically the forest allowed to be produced in utter abundance with almost no effort. A space had only to be cleared in the forest, the suckers planted, and eighteen months later there was a dense grove of plantain trees, each bearing its huge hand of fruit. The crop was never known to fail and there was no known limit to its production. Manioc was almost as easily grown; the work of clearing had to be rather more thorough, the planting was rather more arduous, but with ample virgin soil for the growth a crop was assured in return for small labour. Manioc and plantains; the forest gave these generously, so that there were always bananas and tapioca, tapioca and bananas, on which a man

could live. Tapioca and bananas meant a continuous diet of starch; the oil palm lived only scantily and precariously here on the verge of the inner plateau of Africa, and its rich orange-coloured oil, so generous of fat, was almost as great a rarity as goat's flesh.

The forest provided almost no meat. The rare forest antelope sometimes fell into a pitfall or succumbed to a fortunate arrow to provide an ounce or two of meat for each of those entitled to a share, at intervals of years an elephant fell into a similar trap. That was an occasion always to be remembered when every man, woman and child in the town would have five or ten pounds of meat apiece, to be eaten in a wild orgy that seldom lay before corruption could set in. Monkeys lived in the tree tops two hundred feet overhead, it was more unusual to hit a monkey with an arrow than a antelope, and it was just as rare for an arrow to find its way through the tangled branches and creepers to hit a pig ot. The leopard lived among the tree tops, and was almost as exclusively arboreal as the monkeys which were its prey, its meat had an unpleasant taste even for a meat-starved man, and it was so ferocious a fighter when wounded that its skin was the one fit garment for Iloa the god. Snakes could be eaten and frogs could sometimes be caught in the streams, but never in sufficient quantity to be taken into consideration in the problem of meat supply. The best meat the forest afforded walked on two legs, the African forest was one of the few places in the world where cannibalism was an economic necessity, where it was indulged in to appease an irresistible, an insatiable hunger for meat.

Iloa was thinking that his late father, Nasa (whose name, seeing that he was dead, could be pronounced by Iloa alone), was in need of a new attendant. It was some considerable time since anyone had been sent to serve Nasa, and it might be fitting that Musini the mother of Lanu should be dispatched on that mission, certainly it would convey honour to Nasa. Musini could be put in a wooden pen for three days, inactivity for that length of time was desirable to make sure that the meat would be in good condition. Then she could be sent to attend upon Nasa, either by quiet strangulation or by a more ceremonial beheading with Iloa's battle-axe—either way would do, for it was not a point of great importance and then there would be smoking joints to eat, meat in which a man could

set his teeth, meat to distend a belly that starved on bananas and tapioca. And the irritation of Musini's constant scolding would cease then, too.

Loa was not thinking about this logically for two very good reasons. He had never been under the necessity of thinking logically, and he was handicapped by his language, which with its clumsy complexities of construction and its total want of abstract terms was not an instrument adapted to argument or for the conveyance of more than the simplest ideas. His mind was much more a meeting ground for conveying impulses, which were checked just then by what Indeharu had to say.

'Last night the moon was dark,' said Indeharu. 'The river waits for you.'

Loa stuffed the last handful of baked plantain into his mouth and swallowed it down. He put the bowl to his lips and tilted it to allow the last of the rich oil to trickle between them. He set down the bowl and called to Lanu, who came running from behind the house, trailing the leopard skin behind him.

'Will you come to the river?' asked Loa.

'The river! The river!' said Lanu, delighted.

He was ready to start at once, with all the eager impetuosity of childhood, but first there were preparations to be made. Indeharu and Vira turned to shout down the street, proclaiming the fact that Loa was about to go to the river. A few people came out from the houses, women with children dragging at them, Litti the worker in iron, an old man or two, some marriageable girls. Indeharu counted them on his fingers. There had to be four hands of people present for the ceremony to be valid, and it took a few moments to complete the necessary total, as some young men came in from the outskirts of the town, while Loa coaxed Lanu into returning the leopard skin cloak and clasped it about his neck again. Indeharu counted up on his fingers again, and shot a significant look at Loa.

'We go,' said Loa.

Towards the river lay the abandoned clearings of the past centuries; at the present time the manioc and banana gardens of the town lay on the side of the town away from the river. So at first the path lay through a thick belt of felled trees, only now beginning to crumble into their native earth again. In the forest there was

always going on a silent life and death struggle for light and air, even for rain. Every plant dependent on these three—as was every one except the funguses—pushed and aspired and strove to out-top its neighbours, to gain elbow room where it could spread out in the life-giving light and air. In the virgin forest the victors in the struggle were the trees, the vast kings of the vegetable kingdom, two hundred feet tall, each ruling the little area around it so completely that nothing could grow beneath them save the funguses which flourished in the deep bed of rotting vegetable matter out of which they rose. The kings had their hangers-on, their parasites, the creepers and vines which the trees themselves lifted towards the sky. These shamelessly made use of the trees in their dignity; rooted in the earth below they swarmed up the unresisting trunks in long slender ropes, up to the topmost branches, by which they leaped from tree to tree, renewing with each other at this height the same struggle for light and air; the successful ones, hundreds of yards long, intertwining in a wild cat's cradle of loops and festoons which bound the tallest trees together and repressed the aspirations of the smaller trees striving to push through.

But where there was a clearing the scene changed. If a big tree paid the penalty for its very success by being selected to be struck by lightning, or if it had died of old age, or if a forest fire had killed trees over a larger area, and more especially where man had cut down trees for his own purposes, light and air could penetrate to earth level, and the lowly plants had their opportunity which they grasped with feverish abandon. The clearing became a battleground of vegetation, a free-for-all wherein every green thing competed for the sunlight, until in a short time, measured in days rather than in weeks, the earth was covered shoulder-high by a tangle of vegetation through which no man could force his way without cutting a path with axe or sword. For months, for years, the lowly plants had their way, dominating the clearing; but steadily the sapling trees forced their way through to climb above and to pre-empt for themselves the vital light. It would be a long struggle, but as the years passed the trees would assert their mastery more and more forcibly, the undergrowth would die away, the fallen trees would rot to powder, and in the end the clearing would be indistinguishable from the rest of the forest, silent and dark.

The abandoned clearings through which led the path to the river were some years old now in their present existence, and at their densest in consequence. The felled trees lay in a frightful tangle, and over them and about them grew the undergrowth, in the four weeks since last that path had been trodden the feverish growth had covered it completely, so that Vira and the young men had to hack and slash their way through. Sometimes the path lay along fallen tree trunks, slippery with lichens; it wound about between jagged branches whose solidity was disguised by greenery as a trap for an unwary person who might try to push through. Old Indeharu toiled and stumbled along on his stiff legs behind the advanced party, and immediately in front of Loa; his whitening head was on a level with Loa's chin. On the dark bronze of his back the sweat ran in great drops like a small cascade of those incredibly rare and precious glass beads of which the town possessed a dozen or two. The sweat drops coursed down Indeharu's bony back until they lost themselves in his loin girdle; the latter was of bark cloth and was as wet as if it had been dipped in water, so that what with the sweat and Indeharu's exertions it bade fair to disintegrate. Loa himself, half Indeharu's age and twice his strength, felt the burden of his leopard-skin cloak; in this undergrowth, with the sun blazing down upon it, the heat and the humidity were intensified, and the flies bit and annoyed with unusual vigour, while bare feet, however horny and insensitive, were inevitably scratched and cut as they were dragged through the tangled vegetation.

Loa was conscious of all these irritations—no one could not be—but he endured them without debate, for debate was something he was unused to. This was the world as it had always been and as it always would be. His erring sister was wandering again, and when she wandered she had to be recalled, in the same way as an itch had to be scratched.

Now they were through the overgrown clearing, and into the forest, the undisturbed forest, into the twilight and the silence. Huge tree trunks emerged from the spongy leafmould, spaced out with almost mathematical regularity by the relentless laws of nature. They soared upwards without change or relief (save for the leafless stems of the vines) until two hundred feet overhead they burst suddenly into branches and foliage, making a thick roof through

which no direct light could penetrate. Up there lived the monkeys and the birds, and the sun shone, and the rain fell. To be down here in the darkness—for inevitably here it was too dark for any vegetation to grow—was to be inside the crust of the world, cut off from the exterior. Yet within the forest Loa could relax and feel at home. The forest was his brother, just as the sun was his brother and the moon was his sister, and Loa had a feeling that the forest was a kindly, friendly brother. The forest suited his temperament or his physique, and he lengthened his stride until he trod on the heels of Indeharu hobbling along in front of him. Loa poked him in the ribs with the end of his battle-axe as a further reminder to quicken his step. Indeharu was very old, with stores of knowledge as a representative of an almost obliterated generation, but he was just an old man, and Loa had no regard for his feelings.

In the forest here there was no hindrance to travel save for the bogginess underfoot; the broad spaces between the tree trunks allowed of easy walking in any direction. So much so that it was the easiest thing in the world to lose oneself in the forest. Without any landmarks, without any sight of the sun, the moment a man lost his sense of direction in the forest he lost everything. He might wander for days, for weeks and months, seeing nothing but tree trunks around him and the sombre green roof overhead. There were one or two people in the town who had actually had this experience, and who had been guided home again after a vast passage of time by blind chance and great good fortune. There had been plenty of others who had gone forth on some trifling expedition and who had never returned. They had been lost in the forest. Or they had been trapped by the little men.

This route to the river was as clearly defined as anything could be in the forest. Through the soggy leafmould there wound a faint depression, which a keen eye could detect as a footpath, and the trees on either side displayed frequent cuts and wounds—Loa made a few new ones himself as he walked along, casual chops with his battle-axe that sliced into the bark of the trees, making a mark that would endure for several months until the insects altered its shape so that it did not reveal the human agency that caused it, and until the moss and lichens grew over it and concealed it again.

The disadvantage about a well-marked path was that the little

men would make use of it for their own purposes. They would place poisoned skewers of wood under the leafmould, on which a man might tread; if he did then very probably he would be dead in half an hour, for the little men to feast on him. And they would dig pits and place poisoned stakes in them, roofing the pits over with a frail covering disguised by leafmould, which would give way under the foot either of an antelope or a man. Vira and the young men ahead were scanning carefully every yard of the path, and two of them had strung their bows and fitted broad-headed arrows to the strings, ready to draw and loose at a moment's notice should a little man or a little woman, or any other game, expose itself within range.

And now the trees suddenly began to be farther apart, the leafmould underfoot suddenly became firmer, and the path took a steeply upward slope. For a few moments it was a steep climb. The forest ended abruptly here, where the soil changed to naked rock on which even in that lush atmosphere nothing could grow. They were out of the forest and under the sky, and a few more strides took them to the top of the rock, looking over the vast river. Loa did not like this. He was inclined to flinch a little as he emerged from the forest. The sky was his brother, just as was the forest, but an unfriendly brother, a frightening brother. He did not like great spaces; they affected him as some people are affected by great heights. Except here on the river bank, he never looked out over great distances. The town street was less than a hundred yards long, and that was the next widest horizon he knew; in the forest the trees were close on every hand, and that was where he felt at home. Here on this pinnacle of rock the sky was enormous and incredibly distant.

And the river! A full mile it stretched from bank to bank, the pinnacle of rock, constituting the bluff at the outside curve of a shallow beach, commanded views of five and ten miles upstream and down—terrifying distances. Except at this outcrop of rock the forest came to the water's very edge; indeed, so great was the pressure for light and air that on the river banks the trees grew out almost horizontally, straining out over the water to escape from the shadow of their mightier neighbours, leading a brief precarious life until flood and erosion cut the soil from their roots and they fell into the water. One could never look at the river for long without

seeing some great tree come floating down on the turbulent current, turning and rolling in torment, lifting its arms in mute appeal to the pitiless sky as it rolled.

In the distance the river looked blue and silver, but when one looked down into it from the bank it was muddy and brown, although the time of the real 'brown water,' when the level rose a foot or two and the river took on a more definite colour, was still a month or two off. The surface of the river was never still; a storm would work it up into great rollers, and on a calm day like this, when at first sight the surface seemed almost oily, closer observation would reveal great swirls and motiveless crinklings, sinister, ugly movements as the broad water went sliding along, coming from nowhere, going nowhere, hateful and fearsome in its majesty. Loa watched Lanu pick up a fragment of rock and hurl it into the river with delight in the splash and the ring. Behaviour like that made Loa a trifle uncomfortable, for it savoured of unconventionality, but it was not quite bad enough for Loa to check Lanu—nothing ever was.

Indeharu was waiting for the ceremony to begin. Loa stood forward.

'Sister,' he said, looking down the river to the distant reach whither his erring sister had strayed. 'Come back from under the water. Come back into the sky. The—the——'

'The nights are dark,' prompted Indeharu, as he always had to do.

'The nights are dark, and your sons and daughters cannot fill the sky. Come back. Grow bigger, for the nights are very dark. Come back, my sister.'

Somewhere under the surface of the river his sister was hiding; everyone knew of the liking she had for the big yellow river. A few people who had been caught by darkness away from the town, and who had been forced to spend the night beside the river, had told him of how she stretched her arms out over the water and how her spirit danced on its surface. Every month she wandered back to it and hid herself in its depths, and had to be recalled by her brother.

A cloud of butterflies was flying along the river in a vast bank, reaching from the surface nearly up to the level of Loa's face, more than a hundred feet, stretching nearly half a mile across the river and a quarter of a mile down it. With the wind behind them they

passed rapidly downstream, a lavender-tinted cloud bank. Flaws of wind recoiling from the bank whirled parts of it into little eddies, and the sun shining down on them caught the millions of wings and was reflected back in a constant succession of rosy highlights. Lanu clapped his hands at the sight of them.

'What are they?' he asked, excitedly.

'They come from the sky,' answered Loa, heavily.

No doubt they were beautiful, but Loa was too disturbed mentally by the vast distances to experience more than mixed emotions regarding them. His brother the sky was looking down at him from all directions, and he did not like that; it was like having an enemy at his back. Across the river the forest was dwindled to a mere strip of blue in the steamy atmosphere. It was frightening to see the forest so insignificant, the sky so big. It gave Loa no doubts regarding his own status as a god—the first among equals among sky and forest and river and sun—but it disturbed him violently by its disruption of the usual state of affairs. It was, not respectable, it was not usual, it chafed him and irritated him.

'Look! Look!' said Lanu, pointing.

Far up the river there was a dark speck to be seen. It moved upon the surface, and as it moved reflected sunshine winked from it. A boat, with the sunshine gleaming on the wet paddles. That was a phenomenon to be regarded with a dull lack of interest. There were other men in the world, Loa knew, besides the people of the town and the little men. Some of them went about on the river in canoes. In the days of Nasa, Loa's father, there had been another town close here by the water's edge, but Nasa and his people had fallen upon it one night and killed everybody in it, and had feasted lavishly in consequence for days afterwards. The men of that town had used canoes, so Indeharu said. So other men existed, and some of them used canoes on the river. And rain fell from the sky; there was no need to think further about either matter. The young women and the young men were gazing up the river at the canoe, and talking excitedly about it, their excitement mingled with some trepidation because they knew so little about other people. But Loa knew no fear; there was no reason why he should fear anything in the world.

'I go,' he said to Indeharu, for he wanted to free himself from the irritation of thus being exposed to the sky.

'Loa goes back!' proclaimed Indeharu.

Vira hustled the young men off along the path to make the way safe, and Indeharu followed them. As Loa left the high point to descend again to the forest the remainder flung themselves on their faces, their noses to the ground, for him to walk past them, but Loa hardly spared a glance for the row of glistening dark brown backs. He walked on along the path, and breathed more freely and gratefully as he left the sky behind him and entered into the steamy twilight of the forest. Before him Lanu capered along, full of the joy of living. Lanu had devised a new way of walking. Instead of taking strides with alternate feet he was trying to step twice with each foot in turn. He poised on one foot and skipped, and then poised on the other foot and skipped, his arms held high as he balanced. So they went back into the forest, Loa swinging his battle-axe and Lanu skipping in front of him.

CHAPTER

2

SOME YOUNG MEN OF THE TOWN HUNTING IN THE FOREST HAD captured a strange woman. They brought her back with them, and everyone assembled to look at her and to listen to her absurd speech. Delli, her ridiculous name was, she said—in itself that was enough to make people laugh and clap their thighs. All her words were comical like that, with l's where r's should be, and the strangest turns of speech. Everybody in the town knew there were many ways of addressing people; one spoke differently, with different words, if one were addressing one person, or two persons, or many persons, or if the persons addressed were old or young, male or female, married or single, important or unimportant. But this woman muddled it all up, and spoke (when it was possible to disentangle her curious pronunciation) to the crowd as if it were made up of three little children. Everyone laughed uproariously at that.

They brought her to Loa, where he sat on his tripod stool with Indeharu and Vira standing behind him, and they swarmed close round her to hear the quaint things she said.

'Who are you?' asked Loa.

'Delli,' she said.

That ridiculous name again! Everyone laughed.

'Where do you come from?'

'I come from the town.'

That was just as ridiculous as her name. *This* was the town, and everyone knew it. She rolled her eyes from side to side at the crowd, a very frightened woman. She held her hand over her heart as she looked about her, naked save for a wisp of bark cloth. She was a very puzzled woman as well, quite unable to understand why the simple things she said should occasion so much merriment.

'She was in the forest eating amoma fruits,' interposed Ura, one

of the young men, explaining with the proper gestures how they came to catch her. 'She did not hear us. Maketu went over that way. Huva went over there. We went silently forward through the trees. Then she saw Maketu and ran. Then she saw Huva and ran the other way, towards me. I was behind a tree, and I sprang out and I caught her. She hit me, here, on my shoulder, and she scratched with her nails. But still I held her. She could not escape from Ura.'

'She was eating amoma fruits?' asked Loa.

'Yes.'

Amoma fruits were not good eating; their watery acid pulp could not deceive a healthy stomach for a moment. Children ate them during their games, but no sensible person ever did. Loa stared harder at the strange woman. The scar-tattooing on her cheeks and upper lip was of an odd pattern. She was terribly thin, like a skeleton, her bones standing out through her skin, and her breasts fallen away to empty bags although she was a young woman, not yet the mother of more than two children or so. And her body and legs and arms were covered with scratches, some of them several days old, some of them fresh, but altogether making a complete network over her. She was calmer now, but Loa's next question threw her into a worse panic than ever.

'Why were you in the forest?' asked Loa.

Her face distorted itself with fear.

'Bang bang,' she said, and repeated herself. 'Bang bang.'

That was almost too funny to bear, to see this amusing woman shaking with fright and to hear her say 'bang bang.' She goggled round at the laughing throng and took a grip of herself. When she spoke again the intensity of her emotion made her voice a hoarse whisper, but silence fell on the crowd and every word could be heard.

'Men came,' she said. 'Many men, at night. We were all asleep. Bang bang. Bang bang. Men were killed, women were killed. My man was sleeping beside me, and he woke up and took his spear. Everyone was shouting. Other men of the town came running into the house. Some were wounded. We stood by the door with spears, and we would not come out although they shouted to us to come out. Houses were burning so that we could see out. Bang bang. Bang bang. Fire in the night, like red lightning. My man fell down

and he was dead. Still we would not come out. Then our house burned. They were waiting for us outside the door, so I would not go out when the men did. I jumped up and caught the roof beams of the house. Not all the thatch was burning, so I pulled the thatch aside and climbed through the roof. I stood there and all the town was burning. Bang bang. Bang bang. The thatch was burning beside me and so I jumped. I jumped far, very far. The old clearing was beside our house and I jumped into it, right into the bushes. I tried to run through the bushes, but I could not go far, not in the dark. I lay there and saw the flames and heard them shouting. My baby—I think I heard her cry too.'

Delli stopped speaking, her hand to her heart again. A babble of talk rose from the crowd the moment it ceased to be repressed by the dramatic nature of Delli's utterance. The fantastic tale must be discussed. Loa waved his arm for silence.

'What did you do?' he asked.

'I lay there,' said Delli, 'and daylight came while the flames were still burning. I climbed an old tree trunk and looked into the town. The people were gathered at one end, with the strange men round them. Some of them were pale men.'

'Pale men?' demanded Loa.

'They had not faces like ours,' said Delli, struggling wildly to explain something beyond all experience.

Her hands went up to her own face in feverish gestures trying to convey an impression of features quite different from the broad nostrils and heavy jaws which characterized the only human faces she knew.

'They wore clothes -so.'

Delli flung one arm across her breast and her hands fluttered as she tried to give a mental picture of an ample cloak.

'And they were pale men?' asked Loa. Clothes were something he knew something about, for he wore a leopard skin himself, and women often wore bark cloth gowns, but pale faces were something else. 'Were they like the little men?'

'No! Oh no!' said Delli.

The forest pygmies were often of a far lighter shade than the village-dwelling natives, inclining to pale bronze, but they had the same kind of features as the rest of Delli's world and of Loa's world.

'They were big men. Tall men,' said Delli. 'With thin noses and their faces were— grey.'

Loa shook his head in admission that this was more than he could understand.

'What did these men do?' he asked.

'They tied the people together. With poles. They tied one end of a pole to someone's neck, and the other end of the pole to someone else's neck.'

Loa had never heard of such a thing being done. The whole story was of something beyond his experience, beyond his scanty traditions.

'What did they do next?' he asked.

'They came to the banana groves to cut fruit. And in the old clearings there were many people hidden besides me, people who had run into the clearings when the town burned. They saw us, and they came after us. They had axes and swords, and I think they caught all the other people.'

That was quite probable; a man with a sword to cut a path for himself would easily overtake an unarmed fugitive trying to make his way through the tangled undergrowth of an overgrown clearing.

'And you?'

'I went right through the clearing. A man was chasing me but he did not catch me. I came into the forest and I ran from him, and then he did not chase me any more. But still I ran, and when I stopped I did not know where I was.'

This was something everyone could understand; there was a murmur of agreement in the listening throng. To lose one's way in the forest was very easy indeed; to be fifty yards from the nearest known landmark was the same as being fifty miles from it if once the sense of direction was lost. Loa knew now the explanation of Delli's network of old scars. Plunging through an abandoned clearing to escape pursuit would tear her skin to ribbons. She must have been streaming with blood by the time she reached the forest. The newer scratches must have been acquired in the ordinary course of life in the forest, searching for food.

'Where was your town?' he asked.

Bewilderment showed itself in Delli's face again.

'Many days. Many days away, I do not know. I looked for it.'

There was a puzzled murmur from the crowd. It was hard enough for anyone there to realize even that other towns existed. But everyone in the crowd knew his town so intimately and well. Despite their knowledge of the ease with which one could lose oneself in the forest, it was impossible for them to sympathize with someone who simply could not say where her town was. They could not put themselves in her mental situation; a woman might as well say she did not know where her own body was. Delli's face did not lose its look of bewilderment; her expression was fixed and she was staring at something far away.

'I cannot stand,' she said faintly, and with that she abruptly sat down.

Still bewildered in appearance, puzzled by the strange new feelings within her, she swayed for a moment, and then her head came forward to her knees, and next she toppled over one side and lay limp and unconscious. Musini came forward and knelt over her, and prodded the bony back and the skinny loins. She raised one of the skeleton arms and shook her head over it with distaste.

'Nothing there now,' she said, letting the limp arm drop to the ground. 'She has long been hungry.'

'In a pen she will grow fat,' said Loa, looking round at Vira, who nodded. It was Vira who attended to the temporal business of Loa's rule, as Indeharu attended to the spiritual. Loa had to say nothing more about the pen; Vira would attend to that. Loa looked down at the skinny limbs; plenty of food, and some days of idleness in a pen, would fill them out again. Even a healthy well-fed human was all the better for three or four days in a pen; idleness improved the quality of the meat. Moreover, this stranger with the queer speech and the odd experiences might be a more welcome visitor to his father Nasa than some ordinary man or woman of the town—Musini for instance—as she would bring with her an element of novelty. She might amuse Nasa while she served him.

'See that she has food, plenty of food,' said Loa to Musini.

It was hot here in the sun, and Loa had been attending to business for more than an hour, quite long enough for him to feel restless and in need of a change of occupation. He rose to his feet, and the assembled crowd instantly fell forward on their faces; they had been close-packed standing up, and now they carpeted the ground

two or more deep. He turned and walked back to the narrow strip of shade cast by the eaves of his house. There he would doze for a while; as the village became aware that he had retired they began to withdraw, in proper humility. Silent at first, and moving with constraint, they soon began to elbow each other and to chatter as they streamed off down the street.

A few idlers dallied to watch Musini and a subordinate wife revive Delli with food and drink, but Vira interrupted that pastime by setting them to work on constructing a pen: cutting stakes, pointing them, and driving them deep into the earth with heavy mauls, and connecting them together with many strands of creeper. Everyone else was all agog with the fantastic story Delli had told; they were busy discussing the grey men who wore clothes and had faces different from ordinary people, who killed people with a noise and a flash, and who tied their captives together with poles. Loa's lethargic brain was idly turning over the same matters as he lay in the shade—later Indeharu and Vira would tell him what they thought about it all. And even perhaps at some time he would hear about it from Musini or other women.

For the stagnation of a thousand years—of two thousand years, of three thousand years—was coming to an end. Invaders were entering into Central Africa, the first since Loa's forebears had infiltrated into the forest among their Pygmy predecessors all those many centuries ago. Strangely enough, it was not the European, restless and enterprising though he might be, who was penetrating into these forest fastnesses. The European was still confined to the coastal strip, although European culture and influence was slowly percolating inland. It was an Asiatic culture which was at last reaching out to central Africa, all the way across the huge continent from the east. Mohammedanism had taken no more than a hundred years after Mohammed's death to flood along the Mediterranean coast of North Africa, to engulf Spain, and even to cross the Pyrenees, but it took twelve hundred years of slow advance to creep up the Nile valley, to circle round the Sahara desert, and now to penetrate into the Equatorial forest.

In twelve hundred years the original Arab stock had become vastly attenuated; the invaders were often hardly lighter in colour, thanks to continual miscegenation, than the black peoples they

conquered. But most of them still showed the aquiline profile that distinguished them from the pure Negro, and many of them bore proof of their Arab blood in their swarthy complexions—the 'grey' colour that Delli had noticed. Yet they were marked out far more plainly in other ways from the people they were attacking. Besides their guns, and their clothes, and their material possessions, they had a religion that demanded converts, a social organization that made movement possible, and a tradition of activity more important than all.

More than one culture contributed to that tradition. In the Eastern Mediterranean Greek civilization had profoundly influenced Arab thought. The tiny arable plains of Greece and the Greek islands were no more conducive to stagnation than the deserts of Arabia. It was a world where men went—were driven—from one place to another, where it was of the first necessity to inquire, to seek out, to make contact with other peoples who might supply some of life's necessities. The sceptical, the inquiring turn of mind was the natural one, and the geniuses who arose through the centuries found themselves in a civilization ripe for them; they had available to them languages admirably suitable for argument and discussion, and the invention of writing which would perpetuate their thoughts and enable them to influence the thinking of future generations. It may be strange, but it is true that Plato and Aristotle, as well as Mahommed, had something to do with the raiding of Delli's village by swarthy half-castes bent merely on acquiring slaves and ivory.

Loa and his people were the product of an entirely different set of circumstances. They never knew what famine was, for the plantain and the manioc provided an unfailing source of food in return for very little effort. Sleeping sickness and malaria and cannibalism combined to keep the population small. The forest made migration—even minor movements—almost impossible, restricting the spread of ideas and the diffusion of inventions. The absence of writing made progress difficult, for each generation was dependent on the scanty information conveyed by word of mouth, and even if the forest people had learned to write, their language—the clumsy, complicated, unimproved language of the barbarian—was enough to hamper thoughts and impede its diffusion. Thought is based on

words, and Loa's words were few and simple yet linked together—tangled together would be a better term—by a grammar of unbelievable clumsiness. And Loa lived in a climate where there were no seasons, where the nights were hardly less warm than the days, where it was easy to do nothing—as Loa was doing now; where there was no need to take thought for the morrow—and Loa was taking none.

CHAPTER

3

DELLI LIVED IN HER LITTLE PEN A FULL WEEK. SHE WAS NOT ACTIVELY unhappy in it, not even actively uncomfortable, for they made it six feet long and three feet wide, so that she could lie at full length, and three feet high, so that she could sit up in it. They thatched it roughly with big leaves so that the rain hardly came through at all, and Musini herself gave her another couple of armfuls of leaves on which to lie, which was a sensible precaution, as someone as thin as Delli was at the start, and as scratched, might have broken out into sores had she been compelled to lie on the undisguised earth. They interwove the palisades, and the beams of the roof, with tough creeper stems, so that there was hardly a place wide enough to pass through the bowls of food which Musini saw to it were continually being provided for her.

So for some days Delli was content to lie in her pen recovering from the hardships of her wanderings in the forest. To lie still, to sleep, to fill her belly all through the day with good food; that was all Delli wanted at first, and a few days of it made a great difference to her condition. The bones of her skinny limbs were soon less apparent; her ribs disappeared under a layer of fat, and her previously lifeless-looking skin took on a healthy gloss. It was gratifying to Loa, when he walked past her pen, to see how she was responding to treatment. It boded well for the future; his meat hunger was a perfect obsession now, and all his dreams were positive torment, full of tantalizing visions of meat. In his dreams he could even smell the delicious stuff, and he would wake up with the saliva running from his mouth.

It was only natural, then, that he should be moved to wild rage when Vira pointed out to him one morning that Delli had been

trying to escape. She had gnawed through a full dozen of the tough dried vines, and in a purposeful manner, too.

'See,' said Vira. 'These she has bitten through.'

He pointed to the chewed ends, all between one pair of palisades. Then he went on:

'Soon she would chew these, where the wall meets the roof. She would bite through this knot, and this one. And then——'

Vira made a gesture to show how then Delli would have been able to force the two palisades apart a little way, just wide enough, presumably, for her to slip through. And then in the darkness she would make her way out of the village into the forest, where she would be as inaccessible as if she were already serving Nasa. Anger at the thought of losing her made Loa quite frantic.

'She is a wicked woman,' raved Loa. 'She is a thief, an adultress.'

Loa's language contained some twenty synonyms for 'adultress,' each expressing a different aspect from which the act was regarded; each word was liable to be used as a term of opprobrium, and Loa used them all. His heavy features were drawn together in a scowl of rage.

'She is a devil, an ape,' said Loa.

Delli was looking up at him as she crouched in her pen; her eyes were unwinking and her face expressionless.

'Bring me that stick!' roared Loa and someone ran and obsequiously fetched it.

Loa snatched it from him and rushed at the pen. He could not beat her or strike her with any advantage, thanks to the stout palisades which surrounded her. He could only prod her with the stick, but his prods were dangerous and painful, delivered as they were with his full strength. Delli screamed and rolled over, trying to protect her more vulnerable parts; Loa might have killed her then and there had his rage lasted longer. But sanity came back to him, and he let the stick fall, and wiped the sweat from his face with his hands.

'Bring more vines!' he ordered. 'Tough ones. Hard ones. Stringy ones. Mend that hole! Put more vines all round the pen and over the roof, and see that the knots are tight.'

A fresh idea struck him, a really important one.

'What old women are there?' he asked. 'Ah! There is Nari. Come here, Nari. Vira, tie her legs with vines. Tether her to the pen. Nari,

you will watch over Delli. You cannot go away. You will stay here all through the day and the night. If ever Delli tries to bite through the vines you will cry out. Loudly. Have you heard me?" /

The old woman stood on her feeble legs with the sun in her eyes. Oppressed at the same time by the majesty of Loa and by the sunlight, she blinked and squirmed.

'Have you heard me?' shouted Loa.

'I have heard you,' she piped at last.

'See that it is done,' said Loa to Vira. 'Musini, see that Nari is fed as well.'

He glowered round at them all; he was still too moved and excited at the moment to consider relapsing again into torpor, and he strode off aimlessly at first. It was only when he was on the way down the street that he remembered a reason for going this way. From the farthest end of the street came the regular tapping of a drum; Tali, one of the sons of Litti, the worker in iron, was beating out a new rhythm. He was always experimenting with such things, perhaps to the detriment of his real work. But a good drummer made an important contribution to the life of the town, and if his father would buy him a wife or two whether Tali worked in iron or not, that was all to the good.

This end of the street was not nearly as quiet or as clean as the other end where Loa's house stood. Here ran the little swampy stream, tributary to the great river two miles away, which supplied the town's drinking water and carried away its trash. The stink of the rotting piles of refuse was perceptible to Loa's nose where he stood, but refuse piles always stank. Where the forest came right to the edge of the town stood Litti's iron works, in the shade of a group of large trees. On the flat tops of two rocks glowed charcoal fires, blown to a fierce heat by bellows worked by small children. Litti was squatting beside them with his eldest son; a short distance away Tali was tapping on his drum, while round him a little group of idlers made tentative attempts to adapt a dance step to the rhythm. Litti and his family did not prostrate themselves before Loa; when they were actually engaged in the working of iron there was no need.

'What of my son's axe?' asked Loa.

'It will be made,' said Litti tranquilly.

He raised his white head to see where the sun stood.

'Now?' asked his son.

'No, not now,' answered Litti.

Loa squatted down on his heels to wait; there was a deep fascination about watching the waves of heat play over the surface of the glowing charcoal as the bellows worked. Charcoal burned without a flame; Litti had the secret of preparing it. He would go into the forest and cut a great heap of wood, set fire to it, and bank earth upon it. After a time the wood would lose its fiery spirit, and change itself into a coal black reproduction of itself, which, when ignited, needed the spirit of the air blown into it by bellows to make it burn well.

Those rhythms Tali was tapping out were quite captivating; time passed unnoticed.

'Now,' said Litti at length.

'Hey!' called Litti's eldest son, rising to his feet, and one of his brothers detached himself from the group of dancers and came to help. With a pair of tongs they opened the larger of the fires, revealing in its heart a glowing lump of material, so hot that it was white and brilliant. They swept the little fire from the other rock (it was only there to make that rock hot) and, seizing the glowing lump in the tongs, transferred it to the hot surface. Then they took heavy iron hammers that stood nearby, and began to pound it. At every blow a fountain of sparks shot from the incandescent lump, clearly visible in the deep shade. They struck and they struck, turning the lump with the tongs, until its white heat died away and it glowed only sullenly red and it ceased to give off sparks under the blows. Litti got stiffly to his feet and peered down at the red mass.

'It is iron,' he decided. 'Soon we will make the axe.'

His sons lifted the lump back into the fire, piled more charcoal upon it, and the waiting child set to work again with the bellows. The young men's brown skins glistened with sweat.

'It takes many days for an axe to be made,' grumbled Loa. 'And after that I shall need a collar and bracelets for my son like these.'

He fingered his own ornaments, spirals of wrought iron sprung round his neck and arms.

'That will take longer yet,' said Litti. 'For that I shall need a wife for my son Tali.'

'Let him tell me which girl it is he wants,' said Loa, 'and I will see.'

His bare toes were playing gratefully in the thick bed of dead sparks which covered the soil for yards round, the accumulation of a thousand years, of the labour of fifty generations of Lit i's predecessors. Out in the forest, beyond the swampy stream, was an outcrop of reddish rock—it had once been an outcrop, but now it was a basin, for so much of it had been dug away. Within this rock lay the spirit of the iron. When a lump of it was heated to a white glow and then pounded with hammers the devils that enchained the iron flew off in sparks. Three or four such poundings freed the iron completely, so that it lay in a dark hard lump. Under the influence of fire it softened, and with hammers it could be beaten into any shape desired, and given an edge which would cut wood. But with fire and water the iron could be made better yet. It was a tricky thing to do— even old Litti often made mistakes. But an axehead, or a billhook, or a sword, heated in the glowing charcoal and then cooled in water became hard and glittering and when ground upon a smooth rock became so sharp that even the hardest woods to be found in the forest could be cut by it.

The economy of the town was built up round the iron axeheads made by Litti and his predecessors. They enabled the forest to be cleared and crops of manioc and banana to be grown, thereby distinguishing Loa's people from the little men and women who wandered in the forest living on what they could catch, and on what they could steal from the cultivated plots. Probably the town in the first place had come to be situated where it was because of its proximity to the outcrop of iron ore. Yet iron was still a valuable and scarce commodity; an axehead represented several weeks of labour on the part of several men, so that the small axehead Loa was having made for Lanu was an extravagant gift, while the set of ornaments for which Loa was now negotiating was worth a wife—was worth a pension for life, in other words. Litti's iron tools represented a prodigious capital investment. The few iron cooking pots in the town were precious heirlooms, and no one ever dreamed of using iron in arrowheads; sharpened points of hard wood were always used for those. In fact, these dwellers among the trees naturally made use of wood for as many purposes as possible, and iron was mostly used for the cutting of wood.

Tali had now perfected the rhythm he had been striving for.

There was a neat series of beats, and then a hesitation, like a man stumbling, a recovery, and then another stumble. A man could hardly keep from laughing when he heard that rhythm. It was a good joke, something really funny, catching and captivating. The dancers were grinning with pleasure and excitement. They had formed round Tali in a semi-circle, and the dance to suit that rhythm rapidly evolved itself. They closed slowly in on him with mock tenseness and dignity. Then a sudden sideways shuffle, half in one direction and half in the other. A quick interchange of places, a backward swirl, and they were ready in the nick of time to begin the cycle again. It was an exciting and stimulating dance, amusing and yet at the same time intensely gratifying artistically. People came swarming from all points to join in, and the semi-circle grew wider and wider. Soli, Mother's brother's son of the dying Uledi, leaped into the centre.

'Hey!' he shouted. 'Hey, hey, hey!'

He was up on his toes, posturing picturesquely. He reeled to one side, he reeled to the other side, while behind him the crowd neatly shifted in time with him, interchanging in a geometrical pattern vastly gratifying. Tali thumped and thundered on his drum. His eyes were staring into vacancy over the heads of the dancers. He touched the side of the drum with his elbow to mute it, and its tone changed from loud mirth to subtle mockery.

'Hey!' shouted the crowd.

Tali introduced a new inflexion into the rhythm. He made no break in it, perhaps not even a metronome could have measured the subtle variation of time. But now the drumbeat told of high tragedy, of vivid drama. Soli in the centre caught the change of mood, and found words for it.

'The tall tree totters!' he intoned. 'Run, men, run!'

The drum thundered, the dancers interchanged.

'Run, men, run!' roared the crowd, catching the final beats.

'It hangs upon the creepers,' sang Soli in his nasal monotone. 'Down it falls!'

Beat—beat—shuffle—shuffle.

'Down it falls!' roared the crowd.

Tali remembered the shrieking monkey which a few months back had been brought down entangled in the vines when a tree had been

felled. He muted the drum again, and Soli followed his line of thought.

'Silly little monkey!' wailed Soli. 'How he cries!'

The drum fell almost silent, so that the united tread of bare feet could be plainly heard in the dust.

'How he cries!' mocked the crowd.

Now the drum changed to a savage mood.

'Watch him as he struggles!' sang Soli.

He allowed a whole cycle of the rhythm to go by to allow the tension to build up. The drum roared savagely.

'Watch him as he struggles,' sang Soli. 'Cut his throat!'

Beat - beat - shuffle - shuffle.

'Cut his throat!' shrieked the crowd.

Practically everybody in the town had come to join in the dancing now. On one wing Indeharu's grey head was conspicuous, bobbing about as he capered on his skinny legs amid a group of excited girls. Loa stood alone behind Tali; he might perhaps have capered with the crowd for his divinity was such that he need never fear for his dignity, but the habits of a lifetime kept him by himself. Alone behind Tali he leaped and bounded to the intoxicating rhythm. Strange feelings were stirred up within him by it. Inwardly he was seething; he was bursting with inexpressible emotions. He sprang into the air and shook his battleaxe at the sky above the forest, the distant, unfriendly sky, usually so contemptuous. He felt no awe for the sky now. He waved his battleaxe and by his actions he challenged the sky to come down and fight it out with him, and he exulted when the sky shrank away from him in fear.

Still the drum beat on with its maddening rhythm. Soli or some other had introduced a variation into the dancing; after the crossing-over step everybody whirled twice round now in wild abandon. The pace had increased slightly, too; the mocking beat of the drum had perceptibly accelerated. Tali was working on his drum as though possessed of a devil, and the people were leaping and whirling and shouting in time to it. Carried away by the wave of excitement Loa came bounding into the semi-circle. Every leap took him a yard into the air; he swung the heavy battleaxe round his head in a wide circle. Soli met him in front of the crowd, and pranced to join him. The axe was whistling through the air, and

Soli saw it just in time. If he had not, he would have gone to serve Loa's ancestors at that very moment. But Soli had the quickness of thought that made him such a good extempore singer, and the deftness of balance that made him a good dancer. He ducked under the sweep of the glittering edge. The unexpended force of the blow carried Loa right round, and Soli took advantage of that to bolt into the crowd and make himself inconspicuous there.

Loa made no attempt to pursue him; indeed, he was hardly conscious that he had struck at anyone, and he could not have named the man who had had such a narrow escape. The blow was the merest gesture. There would have been gratification in the feeling of the axe cleaving flesh and bone, but there was no sense of disappointment in its absence. Loa forgot the incident immediately. He swung his axe, rejoicing in the whistle it made as it parted the air. He whirled faster and faster, carried round by the weight of the blade. Tali at the drum worked up to a climax, writhing in ecstasy as he pounded out the accelerating rhythm. Faster and faster; no living creature could stand that pace for long. Indeharu over at one side fell almost fainting to the ground, and the girls among whom he was dancing stopped, gasping. As one tree brings down another, or as fire spreads from trunk to trunk, so the halt spread through the crowd. Men and women fell, sobbing for breath, and yet laughing with pleasure. Tali gave a final thump to his drum and allowed himself to fall limp on top of it, as exhausted as the others. The cessation of the music found Loa alone on his feet; the sudden ending of it all struck him rigid, so that for a moment he stood like an ebony statue, the axe held above his head. Then his knees sagged and he sank to the ground as well.

It had been a good dance, deriving additional zest from the fact that it had been entirely spontaneous, without any planning at all. Whatever might be Tali's failings as a worker in iron, he certainly made up for them by his merits as a drummer. He deserved a wife, even though that meant withdrawing the labours of a young woman from the communal activities of the town for Tali's personal benefit. Loa felt full of gratitude towards Tali. He might even in a prodigal gesture have given him a wife for nothing, but he remembered how much he wanted those iron ornaments for Lanu. Tali would have to wait until Lanu's little axe was finished and the iron ornaments

well on the way towards completion. It was highly convenient that Litti was willing to put in so much labour to buy a wife for his son.

Over at the place where the iron was made the charcoal fires had burned down to a mere heap of white ashes. Lying within the heap presumably was the lump of iron that Litti would fashion into an axe-head for Lanu. The dance had delayed its completion—even old Litti and the children at the bellows must have been drawn into the dance—but that was the way things happened. When Loa walked back to his house he saw Delli lying in her pen, deep in conversation with Nari, the old woman who had been left to guard her. They were the only human beings left at this end of the town when the dance had been in progress. They had fallen into talk, the way women will, despite the difficulties of the strange jargon Delli spoke; despite the fact that Delli had not long to live.

CHAPTER

4

LOA SQUATTED IN HIS HOUSE CLOSE TO THE OPEN DOOR. IT WAS A dark night, and the darkness inside the house was hardly relieved at all by the glow of the fire which his women had, at his command, lighted outside the door. Uledi was dead of the sleeping sickness, and Loa had to determine who it was had ended her life. For this purpose darkness was necessary, darkness and flickering firelight. Loa had taken the bones—the half-dozen slender ribs—from their usual resting place at the base of the grotesquely carved wooden figure that stood against the far wall. He had set a rough hewn table, of dark wood and with short legs, in front of him so that the firelight flickered over it, and he had laid the bones upon it. All round him there was a hushed silence, for the women knew what he was doing. They were frightened as well as awed. In one of the huts close by a child began to cry in the night, but the wailing was instantly stilled as the child's mother caught her infant to her breast.

Loa looked up at the dark sky, and at the same time laid the bones in a bundle across his palm. Without looking down, he put the ends of the bones on the table and withdrew his hand so that they fell with a clatter on the wood—some woman within earshot, crouching in her house, heard that clatter and moaned softly with fear and apprehension. Still without looking down, Loa put his forefinger among the bones and stirred them gently, just a little. Then at last he looked down at the pattern the bones had made. In the flickering firelight the bones were faintly visible against the dark wood. The pattern told him nothing at first, not even when he rested his forearms on his knees and his brow on his hands and peered down at them for a long time. Loa remembered Vira's hint that Soli was Uledi's mother's brother's son. Uledi had owned a knob of pure iron which hung on a string round her neck. She was

the principal shareholder in an iron cooking pot with tripod legs—a miracle of workmanship and convenience. Such things might well tempt her principal heir, and yet there was no hint of Soli's features in the pattern the bones had assumed. It reminded him more of the gable-end of Huva's house, and yet there was no conviction about the likeness. He pressed his brow against his hands unavailingly; the bones lay uncommunicative, nor could he feel any stirrings of his spirit.

Having sat for so long he raised his eyes again to the dark sky, as black as the black tree-tops that ringed the town so closely. He gathered the bones up into his hand again, laid them on the table with his palm flat upon them, and then spread them by a twist of his hand. He stirred them again with his finger and then slowly transferred his gaze to them. The fire was glowing red, and the white bones reflected the colour. Then one of the logs in the fire fell down, and a little flame sprang up, dancing among the embers. Now the bones began to move, shifting on the table, and Loa felt his knowledge and his power surging up within him. That was a serpent undulating in the shadow, a little venomous snake with red eyes. And these were the rocks at the river's edge, and there was the broad river. The lowering sun was reflected in red from its whole surface. There! Someone had thrown an immense stone into the river, breaking the reflection into a thousand concentric rings. First they spread, and then they contracted and were swallowed up in a dark spot in the middle. The dark spot opened. Was that a flower expanding in the centre of it? A flower? A flower, perhaps, but that was Uledi herself within the opening petals—Uledi in her convulsions with the foam on her lips. She turned over on her side and reached out frantically to the full extent of her right arm. She was reaching for—what was that? What was that which evaded her grasp? Something which scuttled for concealment among the shadows over there. Was it Soli, running as he had run for the protection of the crowd before Loa's axe? Loa groined with the anguished effort of trying to see. Somebody looked back at him over his shoulder for a moment from the shadows; white teeth and white eyeballs. That flashing grin was like Lanu's. It could not be Lanu, not his little son. No, it was a devil's face, now that it showed more clearly, a devil's face, frantic with malignant rage. The most

frightful passions played over it, the way waves of combustion played over the glowing charcoal of Litti's furnace fire. The bared teeth champed, the eyeballs filled with blood. It was utterly terrifying. Loa swayed as he squatted. The flame died abruptly in the fire, and as darkness leaped at him he was momentarily conscious of the cold chill of the sweat in which he was bathed. Then his head sank on to the table.

It was several minutes before he roused himself, cramped and almost shivering. There was a foul taste in his mouth, and his legs were weak as he stood up. The bones, when he gathered them together, were cold and lifeless to his touch. And yet he had only to close his eyes to see again that frightful face. Somebody, inhuman of supreme malignancy had poisoned Uledi. Loa's simple theology recognized the possibility of the existence of devils, but there was no profound lore about them. The major catastrophes of nature passed his world by; his people never knew famine, or droughts, or frost, or earthquake. There was no need in consequence to postulate the existence of evil forces in the world, working against the happiness of mankind. The little people in the forest, with their poisoned arrows and their pitfalls, were human enough; no man could attribute supernatural qualities to men and women whom he not infrequently killed and ate. And disease—sleeping sickness, malaria, typhoid, smallpox, and all the other plagues that kept the population constant and stagnant—was simply not recognized as such. Loa knew of no dread Four Horsemen, and his complex language with its limited vocabulary effectively restrained him from ever venturing into theological speculations. Besides, he knew himself to be god; it was not a question of belief or conviction, but one of simple knowledge. He called his wayward sister the moon out of the river every month, and she came. The sky and the forest and the river were his brothers. Nasa his father had been a god before him, and still was a god, leading somewhere else the same life as he had led here, attended by his wives, consulting when necessary the simple affairs of his people, and possibly—no one could be quite sure—eating meat rather more often than he had down here.

But there were devils in the world, as Loa vaguely knew. He had heard a story of some, a family of three devils, like men but covered with hair like monkeys, who had once come to the town,

before even the time of his father Nasa, and who had torn men and women into fragments before succumbing to the rain of poisoned arrows directed at them. It was a devil something like this, judging by what he had seen among the bones, who had been responsible for the poisoning of Uledi. The little Loa knew about devils chiefly concerned their aimless ferocity, so there was nothing surprising in the fact that one of them should have poisoned Uledi, who had never done him any harm or even set eyes on him as far as Loa knew. The matter was satisfactorily settled, then, and Loa could announce on the morrow how Uledi had come to die. If he had seen anything else among the bones—if the gable end of Huva's house had stood out more clearly and for a longer time, if he had seen Soli's face, or if the bones had arranged themselves in the pattern of somebody's scar-tattooing, it would have been different. There would have been a human miscreant to denounce. The circumstances of the moment would dictate the procedure to follow after that; if the accused were not well liked, or if his (or her) motive were at all obvious he would be instantly speared or strangled or clubbed or beheaded, but if he protested with sufficient vehemence or eloquence he might be given a further chance. There were beans that grew in the forest; Indeharu knew about them. They would be steeped in water, and the accused would have to drink the water. Usually he suffered pains and sickness, and frequently he died. If he lived, it was a proof that he had not really intended to kill his victim, but on the contrary had done it by accident or without the intention of actually causing death. The ordeal would be considered a sufficient lesson to him and the case could be dismissed with a caution.

Loa's strength was coming back to him. His legs could carry him easily now. He walked into the darkness of his house, finding his way with the ease of a lifetime's experience, and set the bones back in their proper place beside the wooden figure which symbolized something a little vague in Loa's existence. The half-dozen skulls nailed to the wall—relics of bygone days and of distinguished individuals—showed up faintly white, just sufficiently to permit him to see where he stood. The elephants' tusks, treasured mementoes of the few occasions when elephants had fallen into the town's pitfalls, stood in the further corner, beyond the bed. A whole precious leopard skin had been consumed to provide the leather

strips that criss-crossed the bed's framework, and another skin lay on it. No other bed like it existed in the town; it raised the occupant above the earth and the myriad insect plagues to be found there, it was cool and springy and comfortable. That was the whole furniture of the house except for the few other symbols that hung on the walls—even Loa was not quite sure what most of them implied. The dried snake skins, the bunch of feathers, had something to do with his royal divinity. Because of that, he thought little about them, although they struck terror into mere humans.

Loa came back to the doorway of his house.

'Musini!' he called. 'Bring the girl to me.'

He had a new wife whom he had only acquired that day. Pinga, daughter of Guni. Loa heard a low wail of terror, cut short by Musini's urgent whispering. Musini as an old woman of twenty-five had small patience for the whims of a girl of fourteen.

'I bring her, Loa,' said Musini, loudly.

Two dark figures appeared in the faint glow of the dying fire; Loa could just distinguish the girl's slight form as Musini pushed her forward with her hand on her shoulder. The girl hung back and wailed again.

'Go on, you little fool,' said Musini brusquely, giving her a final shove.

Pinga's timid steps brought her within Loa's reach as he stood in the shadow of the doorway. He reached out and took her wrist, but at his touch she cried out and tried to pull away from him.

'Idiot!' said Musini's disgusted voice from out by the fire, but after her first startled movement Pinga stood still except for the tremblings that shook her. Loa, his hand still grasping her wrist, could feel her quivering. He displayed remarkable patience.

'Why not come to me?' he asked.

'I am frightened.'

'You are frightened of me?'

'Of you, Lord, of course. But it is not that. I am frightened of this house—of this house.'

The terrors of the god's house presented themselves to her more violently as she thought of them, and she began to drag back from his grasp again.

'Do not be frightened,' said Loa. 'There is nothing here to hurt you.'

'And it is what you have been doing, Lord. What you have been doing this short time past.'

Loa was at a loss for a moment. It was very hard for him to realize the effect of the abject terror which lay over the town when it was known that he was at work identifying a criminal; it was something he was aware of theoretically, but he had never known terror himself and was no judge in consequence of what it did to other people. And his house, the house with the skulls, and snake skins, and the bunch of feathers, and the carved idol, was his home as he had always known it. He could have small sympathy for those of his people who would, literally, rather die than cross its awful threshold.

'That should not frighten you,' he said.

'But it does, Lord. My belly tells me I am afraid. You have been here with the dead. You have been finding out about things, and - and - I do not want to go in there.'

That thoroughly nettled Loa.

'You are a little fool, is Musini said,' he declared, testily.

It irritated him that someone should display such marked antipathy because he had been divining - divination was one of his natural functions. The girl might as well be frightened because he breathed, or because he had two eyes. It made a personal matter of it, and changed his lack of sympathy to more active annoyance; the girl sensed all this, and her teeth chattered with fear. Paralysed, she ceased to pull away from him, and stood unresisting.

'Enough has been said,' said Loa, with decision.

He dragged her roughly over the threshold, into the greater darkness within. Her active terror renewed itself there, as she thought of the idol and the bunch of feathers close beside her, and she screamed. Loa had his hands upon her now, and the touch of her flesh was rousing in him instincts which overmastered any remaining reasonableness surviving his previous irritation.

Musini wished to extinguish the fire. It had not rained all day, and in that wooden village there was danger in leaving a fire unattended during the night. She had assembled some of the other women and they had filled wooden pitchers with water and brought

them to the fire. Pitcher after pitcher was emptied upon the embers, at first with sharp hissing and sputtering, and in the darkness the heavy steam which arose brought its wet smell to their nostrils. By the time Musini's turn came and she emptied her pitcher the embers were sufficiently quenched for there to be almost no reaction, and there was hardly a sound save the splash of the water on the dead fire. And inside the house the screams had ceased.

Musini looked at the dark mass of the house, almost invisible in the darkness, before she took her way back to her own house. It was not the first time by any means, and by no means would it be the last, that she had brought a young new wife over to Loa's house, most of them trembling and frightened. It was beyond her capacity to wish that she did not have to do this; the conception of human love was something she knew almost nothing about, and the idea of a personal love for Loa the god never occurred to her. She may have noticed that these events upset her and disturbed her, made her sharp-tongued and self-assertive, but even if she did she did not make all the possible deductions from the fact. It was so long since she had become the mother of Lanu her son; men had many wives when they could afford to buy them, and Loa of right had all he desired. She did not know that she wished he did not desire them.

CHAPTER

5

DELLI'S FANTASTIC STORY OF THE STRANGE PEOPLE WITH MAGIC weapons and unnecessary clothing, who had raided her town and carried off the inhabitants, was on its way to being forgotten, like Delli. Had the life of the town proceeded undisturbed for another thousand years, as it had done for the last thousand years, some small fragments of the tale might have survived, imbedded in the lore of the town like fossils in a sedimentary stratum, in the same way as there lingered the memory of the family of gorillas which had wandered into the town thirty years back and had been slain after a bloody battle. There were still occasional allusions to Delli's story in the gossip of the town; it was still a comparatively fresh joke to shout out 'Bang, bang,' in imitation of her. But nobody thought of making any deductions from her story; still less did it rouse any feelings of apprehension. The only raiders the town knew about from its own experience, the only enemies that existed, were the little people of the forest. They were a pestilential nuisance in the persistence with which they stole plantains and manioc; the poisoned skewers and pitfalls with which they beset the forest paths made excursions into the forest dangerous, but all that was part of experience and tradition. Nobody else had ever raided the town, and nobody ever would. Such a thing might well happen to outlandish people with outlandish speech like Delli's, but it could not happen to the town, which was really the world— anything outside it was unreal and of quite doubtful existence.

So that at nights the town lay quiet and unapprehensive. No one dreamed of setting a guard; no one ever lay down to sleep with any doubts as to the morrow. Certainly I oa did not. He was secure not merely in the unchanging present, but also in his knowledge of his own divinity. His lack of imagination about guns and slave

raiders might well be excused. He did not know—he could not know—of their existence. He was even unaware that there were parts of the world where the trees did not grow so densely as to cut off the light from the surface of the earth. Two warnings like Delli's, the arrival of another refugee, and he might have come to believe in the necessity for taking precautions, even at the vast sacrifice of some of his belief in his divine nature. But a single isolated instance was not, and could not be, enough to make him realize the danger approaching the town—all this apart from the fact that he and his inexperienced people could probably never have displayed enough imagination to devise efficient military precautions.

In the Central African forest there often comes a chilly hour before dawn, when the temperature drops to that of a hot summer's day in England. The insect pests grow somnolent, evaporation is easier, and a man who has lain naked through the night, and who has spent all his life in an atmosphere like that of a Turkish bath, may reach gratefully for a cover and pull it over him, only half awake, and then fall into an hour of the most restful sleep granted him. Loa had done exactly that, and he was more deeply asleep than he had been during the whole night, when the slave raiders launched their attack. They came from the far end of the town, across the marshy stream beside Litti's ironworks, where there were no overgrown clearings to impede their advance, and they were half-way up the street before the alarm was given.

Loa heard the first screams and cries in his sleep, and muttered a protest against them, turning over angrily, but the musket shots woke him fully. He sat up on his bed listening to the turmoil down the street. Another musket shot echoed in the darkness, and there was no mistaking it. Loa remembered Delli's 'bang, bang,' and a torrent of recollections poured into his brain. The grey-faced men with clothes on, the killings and the fighting. His ceremonial battle-axe lay as always beside the bed, and he seized it and sprang to his feet; the girl who had shared his bed was whimpering with fear in the darkness. He paid her no attention, but rushed madly out of the house and down the street.

Even outside it was still dark. Loa saw an orange spurt of flame and heard the report of a musket half-way down the street whence

the screams were coming. He had no fear, not even of the guns; his rage at this intrusion carried him in furious haste down the street. Women and children were running past him in the opposite direction, most of them screaming; one of them cannoned into his legs and almost brought him down, but he managed to keep his feet and hurried on. The first house in the street was on fire, and by the light thrown by the flames he could see a group of men gathered round the doorway of another house. People were running out of the door, and as they emerged they were struck down. Loa came yelling up to the group before they were aware of their danger. He swung his axe with all the strength of both arms; the edge of the blade came down on a man's shoulder and clove deep into his body, smashing him to the ground. With another yell Loa whirled the axe again. Someone raised his arm in a futile attempt to guard himself; the axe cut through the forearm as though it had not been there and then shattered the skull. But even while he was dealing the blow someone hit him with a club. It was like an explosion inside his head. He staggered, stupefied but not quite unconscious. Before him there was a white-clothed figure at which he struck, but the man guarded himself with his gun barrel and the axe blade glanced off. Someone struck him a frightful blow with a club on his left side; the breath came out of his body in a groan, and the pain was atrocious. He reeled, and his arms had no strength to raise his axe again. There was another blow on the head. Orange flames and white clothing wheeled in circles round him and his knees could not sustain him. He fell on all fours and yet still strove to rise, but he could not. Strive as he would, he could not even stay on hands and knees, but collapsed limply face downward, with only a trace of consciousness left him. There was stamping and screaming all round him, as he vaguely knew, but the dreadful pain he was suffering occupied most of his attention, while before his closed eyes circled tangled shapes and colours which effectually prevented him from thinking.

Loa was a brave man, though his courage was indistinguishable from stupidity. As soon as he could he roused himself from his lassitude. His head reeled as he sat up, and the pain in it made him sick—pain was something he hardly knew, and this great pain was a total novelty to him, but yet he strove to ignore it, for he had to

go on fighting for his people. The fighting round him had ceased, and the noise of the struggle now centred higher up the street towards his own house. There was a grey faint light of dawn now, by which he could see the two dead bodies that lay beside him. The upturned face of one of them—the man he had almost cloven in half when he struck him on the shoulder—was far blacker than Loa's own chocolate complexion, and the tattooing on cheeks and forehead unlike anything Loa had ever seen before. The gaping mouth seemed to grin, and already there were flies gathering round it. All this Loa seemed to see without seeing. What he took note of was his axe lying there; he had to feel towards it before he could grasp it, for it was hard to focus his eyes. There was a knob-headed club, too, and for some reason he took that in his other hand. He got unsteadily on his legs, stepping clumsily over the other dead man, and went staggering up the street to do further battle for his people, axe in one hand, club in the other.

The raid had already achieved its main objectives. The men who had shown fight had been killed. A good many women and children, and a few men, had been secured as prisoners already, and were being driven in groups down to the far end of the street where they could be conveniently herded together. There were men and women and children hiding in the overgrown clearings round the town, and they could be dealt with next, those of them who could easily be caught.

Here came Pinga and half a dozen half-grown children, driven along by a couple of black men whose spears bore long broad heads of iron, and who carried in their left hands oval shields of hide. The guards raised a shout when they saw Loa reeling towards them, coated with blood and dust, and they came to meet him, while Pinga and the children fell into a wailing helpless group. Loa plunged forward on uncertain legs, but his enemies noted his massive frame and the bloody axe in his hand and came cautiously to the encounter, separating so as to attack him front and rear, and holding their shields before them, their spears poised either to thrust or to throw. For some seconds they circled. Loa sprang forward and struck, but the man he struck at evaded his blow, and Loa only just wheeled round in time, swinging his axe, to ward off the attack of the other. It could not have lasted much longer; a

few more seconds and one or other of those spears would have been through him.

But down the street came a white-clothed leader, one of the 'grey-faced' Arab half-castes, with at his heels a dozen Negro fighting men. The Arab took in the situation at a glance. He took note of Loa's sturdy bulk, and shouted to the spearmen not to kill him, while a sharp order to his own escort sent them to take him alive. Loa was ringed now by enemies, and he stood there, desperate, but with no thought of yielding entering his mind. The Arab saw his ferocious determination, the scowling brow, the lips crinkling back in a snarl to show the white teeth, and he put his hand to the pistol in his sash. But a noose of rope, dexterously thrown from behind, dropped over Loa's head and pinioned his arms. His frantic strength tore the rope from his captor's hands, but before he could free himself it had been seized again by others. They swung him round; he dropped axe and club, and someone reaching out caught him by the foot and brought him down with a crash. They threw themselves upon him, and they were experienced in securing refractory prisoners. Someone roped one of his wrists. He actually got to his feet, heaving off the half dozen men who clung to him, but they brought him down again, flung their weight upon him, securing his other wrist, and bound the two together behind his back. Then they got to their feet, and looked down at him still lying in the dust, his wrists tied behind his back, and the first rope with which he had been noosed still coiled round him. Loa glared up at them from where he lay. He saw the Arab looking down at him, the white clothes and the gay sash, the lean dark face with the coarse cruel lips--a face unlike any he had ever seen before.

'Get up,' said the Arab.

Despite his queer accent the words were intelligible to Loa, but nobody had ever given Loa orders in his life, and he still had no intention of yielding.

'Get up,' said the Arab again

Loa may have been too dazed, both by the turn of events and by his recent struggles, to obey or to reply. Yet even if he had not been he probably would have acted in the same way, with a stubborn obstinacy.

The Arab took from his sash a small whip. It was made from a

single strip of hippopotamus hide, tapering from a convenient thickness for the hand at one end to the fineness of a knitting needle at the other. Flexible, hard, and imperishable, it was ideal for its purpose; a perfect example of mankind's ingenious inhumanity, in that so comparatively rare a material as hippopotamus hide should have been found by experiment to make the best whip for the whipping of men, and women. It was the dreaded kurbash; wherever the Arab culture penetrated in Africa it carried the kurbash with it—fire and sword and the kurbash enforced Arab dominance over the more primitive races.

The Arab swung the kurbash slowly in his hand.

'Get up,' he said for the third time, and still Loa disobeyed.

The Arab struck suddenly and sharply, and Loa started with the pain. It was like sudden fire in his shoulder—an instant acute agony and a lingering intense smarting.

'Get up,' said the Arab; now he made the thong of the kurbash whistle menacingly in the air.

He knew how to handle those dull-witted pagans who were even ignorant of the virtues of the hippopotamus hide until they were demonstrated. Now he struck again three times; it was like being touched three times with a hot iron, and Loa, in his sitting position with his hands bound behind him, fell over on his side as he started at the pain of it.

'Get up,' said the Arab, with another swinging cut delivered with the full force of his arm, and Loa, without knowing what he was doing, scrambled to his feet; the Arab slashed him again, so that the startling pain made Loa leap clear off the ground.

'Next time do as I say,' said the Arab.

Bewildered, Loa tried to run, but one of the black spearsmen caught the trailing rope that encircled his chest and arms and halted him, and the Arab, following him with three quick steps, struck him again and again, each time the pain being so unexpectedly great that Loa jumped into the air.

'Now go along,' said the Arab.

Loa stared about him with frantic disbelief. Pinga and the children were huddled together in a terrified group, terrified not merely at what was happening to them, but even more at the sight of Loa treated in this way; that was the clearest proof of the end of

their world. The faces of the black spearmen wore expressions of dull disinterest; they had so often seen unruly captives reduced to obedience with the kurbash; those who had caught his rope had done so as indifferently as if Loa had been a refractory billy goat. There was no aid in all the world, in all the world which an hour ago had been indisputably his own, in its entirety, where every object, living and dead, had been dedicated to his service. Now he was utterly alone in it, brought down from superhuman to subhuman in a moment of time. There was agony of mind and spirit in the realization, as far as realization went in that unhappy hour.

The spearmen were herding Pinga and the children down the street.

'Go along,' said the man who held Loa's rope, and when Loa did not start immediately he reached forward with his spear to prick him with the point.

The gesture sufficed; Loa had learned the lesson of pain, and he started to walk before his captor down the street. At the far end everyone who had been caught was her led together, many men and very many women and children, naked black spearmen standing guard over them under the orders of a few white-clothed Arabs. At the sight of Loa there arose a thin wailing from the crowd, to see their god and king driven along at the end of a rope. Some of the people even fell down, instinctively, in the attitude of prostration as he approached. The Arab guards laughed at the spectacle, and one of them idly swung his whip with a crack upon the salient curves of a prostrate fat old woman so that she sprang up again with a startled cry, lingering herself in bewilderment. Loa looked round at the misery about him, and sorrow overcame him. Sorrow not merely at his own plight, at his own frightful deposition from divinity, but sorrow too at the plight of his people. Tears ran down his cheeks, and he stood there sobbing, his hands bound behind him so that he could not cover his face.

Many of the raiders were at work beating the overgrown clearings for fugitives; once or twice the loud bang of a musket shot could be heard, as the pursuers brought down a group of pursued for a warning to the rest to stop. Every now and then small groups of captives were brought in and added to the herd.

On the edge of the herd was one of the little people of the forest,

with a rope round him, the end of it held by a spearman. It must have been he who had guided the raiders, for the wandering forest pygmies knew the paths and derived much of their food from the plantations of the townspeople. He was a bright-eyed little manikin, naked like all his people, watching with rapt curiosity the destruction of the vast town and the gathering together of this enormous mass of people. Seven hundred people, men, women and children, had lived in Loa's town. A hundred had been killed, three hundred captured. Of those three hundred perhaps thirty would eventually survive the march across Africa for sale in the slave markets of the Nile Valley of Abyssinia, and of Arabia across the Red Sea.

Two Arabs came along herding a dozen young men of the town, who were bearing on their shoulder the ivory tusks that had been stored in Loa's house. They were a prized collection, of no intrinsic value at all—no one in the town had ever thought of carving ivory—but beyond price for sentimental reasons. Every pair was a memento of a notable occasion when an elephant had been taken in a pitfall, when the whole town had gone on a twenty-four hour orgy of meat eating whose memory, and that of the feeling of triumph, gave pleasure for years afterwards. Every forest village—although Loa did not know it—had similar accumulations of ivory going back for centuries, and it was the existence of these hoards, as much as the chance of capturing slaves, which had lured the Arabs across Africa from Zanzibar and the Nile. But the sight of his lost collection moved Loa almost as much as the plight of his people; the tears ran down his cheeks and dropped upon his dusty chest.

Here came a spearman, limping awkwardly. A barbed arrow was stuck in the calf of his leg, and he was holding the end of it in his hand so that it would not trip him as he walked. He lay stoically still while one of the Arabs freed the barbs from the flesh with a knife and then cut deeply all round the small wound so that the blood ran in streams—these raiders had had long experience with the forest arrows. Loa looked down at the arrow as it lay on the ground. It was one of Soli's, he could see. So Soli had been alive and free at least until lately, and had taken some sort of revenge upon the raiders. The last batch of arrow poison had been of good strength, and probably had not yet grown too old. Definitely not; the wounded man as he sat there was looking round him in a

bewildered fashion. He was babbling foolishly, pointing at nothing. Now his eyelids were drooping, and now he was laying himself down to sleep. Loa watched his death with savage enjoyment.

The nearest house suddenly caught fire and was rapidly consumed by the flames that ran up the dry wood; presumably some ember had been smouldering beside it for some time--two other houses had burned earlier in the day, scattering burning brands. The fire spread to the next house, Huva's; the flames roared in the thatch of dry leaves, and the heat was noticeable even where they were.

Now there was a bustle and stir among the raiders. Another party was arriving. First came a white-robed Arab with a dozen spearmen. And then emerged the head of a short column, and at the sight of the first people in it Loa caught his breath with horror. They were naked men, men like his own people, and they were linked together in pairs by long sticks whose forked ends were clasped about their necks. Loa remembered what Delli had said about those forked sticks. Each man bore a burden upon his head, and at a command from an Arab they all halted and dropped their bundles on the ground. Two of the bundles jangled loudly as they fell, and when they were opened they contained short lengths of iron chain; the first chains that Loa had ever seen, and he could not imagine their purpose. He learned immediately.

Others of the slaves carried between them bundles of forked sticks similar to those about their own necks. A man of authority among the spearmen-- he wore a bristling headdress and his face and body were scarred with fantastic tattooing--picked up one of the sticks. They were five feet long and forked at both ends. He pointed to the two nearest young women.

'Come here,' he said.

He put a fork on the shoulders of one of them, and another man took a hammer and staples and one of the lengths of chain, and stapled the latter to the forked ends about the girl's neck, tightly so that she could just breathe with comfort. He clapped the other fork on the other girl's shoulders and stapled a chain to that, too. So the two girls were fastened to each other rigidly five feet apart, unable to touch each other, and yet free to move as long as they moved in unison. They could never run away through the forest bound together like that, and yet each was perfectly free to carry a

bundle on her head, and any unwieldy package could be slung from the stick between them. Then he tore off the bark-cloth kilts from the girls so that they were naked, and then he turned to another pair.

'Come here,' he said.

He worked with the rapidity of long practice, fastening the captives in pairs, indifferent to their sexes, and stripping them all naked. He came to Indeharu, took one glance at his white hair, and rejected him, making him stand aside, to be joined by other old men and women in a separate group. Loa, when his turn came found himself bound to Nessi, Ura's wife. Nessi was weeping bitterly, hugging her baby to her breast; they struck her to make her raise her head. When they had chained Loa into the fork they freed him from the ropes which bound him: he was helpless now to make any move without dragging Nessi with him, and the chain was close about his throat, threatening to strangle him if he made any move unco-ordinated with hers.

The young children able to walk with their mothers they left free, and many of the women, like Nessi, had infants in their arms; Loa, slowly emerging from his stupefaction, had a momentary gleam of pleasure at the realization that neither Musini nor Lanu were among the prisoners. They might still be free—unless they had been killed. Soon all the prisoners were fastened, save for the children and the group of older people.

'Kill those,' said the headman with a wave of his arm towards the older people, and the spearmen closed in on the group.

They beat in their skulls with their knobbed clubs, and thrust their spears through them. The old people died amid a diminishing chorus of screams. Indeharu broke away and tried to run on his old legs, but a spear flung stuck in his thigh, and a black demon, leaping after him, shattered his skull with a single blow that made a horrible sound of breaking bones. Indeharu was the last to die; the others had already fallen into a tangled heap, although in the heap an arm or a leg still moved feebly. The headman snatched the child from Nessi's arms and flung it to the ground, and someone else thrust a spear into it. Nessi screamed and plunged forward, cutting the scream short as the chain tightened about her throat, for Loa naturally did not plunge with her. Fallen to her knees, Nessi

tried to crawl to where her dead child lay just out of reach, but Loa stood rooted to the earth, and Nessi could not reach it. The chain dragged against Loa's neck.

All the little children, the babies in arms and those who could only just walk, were killed, so that their mothers would be freed of the burden of carrying and attending them. The children who could run beside their mothers were spared; those among the boys who should survive both the long march across Africa and the crude surgery to which they would then be submitted, would fetch high prices in the slave markets of Mecca, higher even than the girl children of undoubted virginity. But the little babies were a liability and in no way an asset; long experience had taught the raiders that to allow a woman to keep her baby was almost certainly to lose them both, and that meant the loss of a carrier.

The slaughter was soon over, and the raiders began apportioning loads among their slaves. The biggest tusk in the town's collection was allotted to Loa and Nessi. It was not one of a pair; maybe the other one had not developed in the elephant's jaw, or maybe its fate had long been forgotten. This one was dark brown with age—an Arab scraped the tip of it with his knife and showed his teeth with pleasure at sight of the pleasant fresh material within. The tusk was five feet long, and of such a weight that a man had to put forth his strength to lift it. They slung it on the stick that connected Nessi with Loa.

Now that everything was ready a party of spearmen started ahead down the path across the marshy stream. Behind them, in single file, two by two, the raiders set the slaves on the march. It soon became the turn of Nessi and Loa. As was only natural, the act of moving from the spot unbalanced Nessi again. She uttered a wail, reaching out for her dead baby, tearing at her cheeks with her finger nails. But a slashing cut from the kurbash brought her promptly out of her hysteria, and her wailing terminated abruptly in a startled cry of pain, and she began to stumble after the others, with Loa walking behind her. While Nessi had wept Loa had looked back at the town; at the flaming houses, at the piled corpses. It was not the same town to him, not the same world. One world had come to an end for him, and he was in another, new and raw and unspeakably harsh. He might still be Loa the god and king, but he was a king

without a kingdom, a god without worshippers, and he had met a power stronger than his own—the whip. He had learned the lesson of the whip even in this short time, even in his dazed and stupid condition.

Nessi stumbled ahead of him down the path. When she checked at an obstruction, I oa caught his throat against the fork; when she took a longer step, the chain jerked against the back of his neck. The tusk in its slings of vine swung between them to their motion. Sometimes the butt-end hit him in the stomach, just below his ribs, and sometimes the point prodded Nessi in the small of the back. The weight of it dragged the fork down against I oa's shoulders and the chain against his neck, and the friction resulting from his motion made the rough wood chafe his shoulders. I oa soon found himself hunching forward and then leaning to one side, to relieve the chafed places. In the neighbourhood of the stream the soil was even marshier than usual in the forest, and at each step I oa sank to his ankles, so that the labour of plodding along with his burden was severe. In the stifling atmosphere of the forest the sweat ran down him in streams and soon his breath was coming jerkily, and his throat was parched.

The boggy-ness of the soil gave way to actual surface water, a sluggish little rivulet creeping among the trees. I oa stooped with his burden to scoop himself a handful of water to drink, but Nessi ahead of him was staggering along blindly and unthinkingly. The tug of the chain at her neck overbalanced him and he fell bringing Nessi down with him, wallowing in the mud below the few inches of water. They scrambled to their feet, the ivory tusk had slipped in its slings and was hanging precariously. I oa grabbed for it still not allowing for the rigidity of the pole between him and Nessi. He choked himself against the fork, threw Nessi forward off her balance again, and then he saw, as they flourished, the tusk slip from its slings and fall with a splash into the water.

Sudden agony in his shoulder as the Arab had come up to the ford and was slashing with his whip. Nessi screamed, roused from her brutish misery, as the kurbash bit into her.

'Pick up the tusk and bring it here,' snarled the Arab. His pronunciation and use of words were as strange as Delli's had been, but they could understand him.

Loa grovelled down into the thick brown water, found the tusk, and with an effort heaved it up in his arms.

'Here!' said the Arab.

The rest of the column was halted behind them, and long experience with many columns had taught him the necessity of keeping them well closed up and on the move. As Nessi and Loa came to the place indicated beside the stream he impatiently motioned the waiting column to go on, and they splashed down across the ford, two by two, naked and sweating and burdened, their eyes cast down, all of them gasping with the heat and the effort.

'Hang up the tusk again,' said the Arab.

Loa struggled with the huge mud-daubed thing clasped in his arms.

'Help me, Nessi,' he said. 'Turn round.'

'Hurry yourselves,' snapped the Arab.

Within the triangle of fork and chain Nessi's neck was free to revolve, and she turned herself cautiously, so as to face Loa. Between them they were able with difficulty to replace the tusk in its slings of vine, and Nessi turned herself about again. The column had all gone by; two spearmen from the rearguard were waiting, at the Arab's orders, to herd them forward in the track of the column.

'Hurry! Hurry!' said the Arab.

The whip bit like fire in their flanks as they started forward again and re-entered the ford; at the first sign of their pace slackening the whip hissed in the air.

They plunged on blindly through the sultry twilight of the forest. Soon they had proof enough that they were following the path of the column. A corpse sprawled beside the path, the head five feet away from the neck, a middle-aged woman's corpse, the breasts flaccid and empty. The tattooing on it was not that of anyone in Loa's town; one foot was bent strangely outwards and supplied the explanation of why the corpse lay there. When that ankle was broken there was no chance of keeping the woman on the march, and the quickest way of getting her out of the fork was to take off her head. The body already swarmed with ants. One of the spearmen walking behind them laughed and made some unintelligible remark, which probably did not refer to the dead woman. Loa knew already that dead bodies were far too common to excite a jest.

And then, farther along the path, Loa caught sight of something else. So blurred was his vision with sweat and exhaustion that at first he did not believe that what he saw had a concrete existence. It might have been something real but with no place in this world, like what he used to see among the bones in that other life. A tree had fallen near the path, bringing down with it a tangle of vines, amid which glowed gaudy flowers, and at this point a shaft of sunshine reached down from the outer sky nearly to ground level. There was light and shadow and a screen of greenery. And from the edge of the screen a face looked momentarily out at Loa. It was Lanu, little Lanu, son of Loa and grandson of Nasa, once a god and a god to be. It was impossible that Lanu should be out here in the forest. Of course; now the face was gone. Loa had not really seen it. And then it came again, among the light and shade, indisputably Lanu, indisputably. The face split into a grin, with a flash of white teeth, and then it disappeared again. It was Lanu looking out at him from the cover of the vines. Loa was too miserable and too weary to think of all that implied. He had seen Lanu, and he was faintly cheered, but he had to go on plodding through the forest under the burden of the fork.

CHAPTER

6

BEFORE SUNSET THEY EMERGED FROM THE FOREST ON TO THE BANK of the big river. The light was still glaringly bright even though the sun was dipping towards the tree-tops on the other bank, and Loa, utterly worn out though he was, felt the old sensation of shrinking a little in the presence of the sky, the usual slight vertigo on looking out on those immense distances. The sky was his enemy as well as his brother, and he had always known it. It must be the sky that had dealt him this fatal blow, through the agency of the raiders. Here was the proof of it, this vast encampment surrounded by terrifying distances.

They had reached the temporary base of the slave raiders, a central point where they had established themselves so as to be able to strike out in all directions and sweep up every community within thirty or forty miles. Here a long wide rocky beach ran down to the water's edge covered with only sparse vegetation. A town of many houses stood above it; the townspeople were now either slaves or dead and the raiders lived in their houses. On the rocky beach was gathered all the accumulated plunder—the captives and the ivory. More than a thousand human beings were there, moving about with a certain amount of freedom; what freedom there was, when they were chained two by two, neck and neck, in the forked sticks. Loa looked with dull amazement at this immense number of people; drawn up on the beach was a row of canoes, vast things, and he stared with fearsome interest at yet another just coming in to the landing place propelled by a dozen glittering paddles.

'This way,' said the Arab.

This was the central dump of the ivory captures. More than a hundred tusks lay together on the ground here, unguarded, for in Central Africa ivory had no more than a sentimental value—that

mass represented a fortune only when borne on men's shoulders a thousand miles to Zanzibar or twice that distance to Cairo.

'Put it down here,' said the Arab.

Loa allowed the tusk to slide out of the slings to the ground. The relief of being free of the weight of it was unbelievable.

'Go over there and get your food.'

The Arab turned away without evincing any more interest in them. His final gesture had indicated a thicker nucleus in the mass of people on the beach.

'Let us go there,' said Loa to Nessi.

The grammatical construction he used was unusual to him; but self-analysis of course was something quite foreign to him, and he took no note of what he was saying. He spoke as one equal to another, not with the complex construction of a superior to an inferior. The physical fact of being chained to one end of a pole while Nessi was chained to the other seemed to make this method of speech inevitable. Nessi began to pick her way towards the little crowd, Loa plunging along after her. Because of the rocky irregularities of the beach they jarred each other's necks as they went along; they passed many other people, all similarly confined in forked poles, all of them as naked as Loa and Nessi. Some were wandering aimlessly, some were squatting or lying on the ground, the individuals in each pair rigidly five feet apart from each other. Among the crowd the situation was more complicated, for the people and their poles were liable to entangle themselves by aimless movements. The focus of the crowd was a wooden trough, beside which stood a couple of white-clothed Arabs and two sparmen. Most of the people were standing dumbly eyeing the trough, not speaking, merely looking. Nessi wound her way through the crowd; the pole behind her bumped against people as she did so; Loa was too weary and numb to make more than a slight attempt to keep it clear. Arriving at the edge of the cleared space round the trough Nessi hesitated, but one of the Arabs singled her out immediately as one who had not already had her ration and beckoned her forward. She approached the trough with Loa behind her.

'Fill your hands,' said the Arab, making the gesture of getting a double handful.

At the bottom of the trough there was a thin layer of cooked

tapioca, and Nessi filled her hands with it. As she did so she realized that she was hungry, and she bent her head to eat, while Loa behind her fumed with sudden hunger—it was twenty-four hours since he had last eaten, and he had fought a battle and made a long march during that time. His restless movements reminded Nessi of his existence at the other end of the pole, and she wheeled aside to allow him to come up to the trough. He scraped himself a double handful of the glutinous starch. The second Arab standing by, a man of more aquiline features, noticed his iron collar and bracelets.

‘Here,’ he called to Loa, beckoning with a gesture of authority.

Loa stared at him stupidly, but the Arab was not a man to tolerate a moment’s hesitation in obedience to an order. With a malignant snarl on his face he repeated words and gesture, and Loa went up to him, dragging Nessi behind him. The Arab reached out and struck him on the mouth with his fist; Loa staggered, dropping most of his tapioca. He winced as the Arab reached out his hand again, but this time all that happened was that his head was roughly jerked back so that his collar could be examined. A mere glance was sufficient to reveal it as base metal, and half a glance sufficed for the bracelets. The Arab turned his back and gave Loa no more notice, and almost instinctively Loa turned to refill his hands at the trough. There were some other late-comers already being fed there, and a warning cry from the guardian of the trough checked Loa in his stride. That Arab had a whip in his hand, and Loa knew whips. But he was hungry. There was a little tapioca still in his hands, and he licked at it; two swallows and it was gone. He edged forward again, but the whip whistled in the air and he drew back. Another late arrival was scraping up the very last of the tapioca from the trough. Then the Arab guard swung his whip again in a wide gesture, driving the lingering couples away; before his whip they withdrew reluctantly, bumping each other with their poles.

Here came a whole group of the Arab raiders, white-clothed, muskets in their hands, striding down towards the river. They took their places at the water’s edge, and spread mats before themselves. They made strange sounds, and strange gestures, dipping their hands in the running water, prostrating themselves with their backs turned to the hidden sun now far behind the trees across the river. Night

was beginning to fall, the eastern sky towards which the Arabs were kneeling was already dark.

'I am weary,' said Nessi, sitting down, she had had experience enough now with pole and chain to do so cautiously, and with due regard to Loa—a tug at his throat meant a tug at her own.

'I too,' said Iot, squatting down as well.

Five feet apart they sat in the gathering darkness. And then Nessi began to weep. She wept out of weariness, she wept for her dead child, for her lost liberty, out of terror for the future and regret for the past. Her weeping rose thin on the heavy evening air, and her example was infectious. Another woman near began to wail, and then another and another, so that the sound spread down the river bank. Some man shouted his sorrows in a raucous dialect, the hard, clipped words punctuating the wailing. Another man echoed the cry in a grunder rhythm. Now the whole encampment throbbed with the misery of Africa. Iot could tell, by the dragging of the pole in the darkness, that Nessi as she sat was swaying her body backwards and forwards in time with her weeping, she was dissolving in an ecstasy of unhappiness, and so were the others, and their misery was dissipating itself in hysteria.

Loa might have been carried away in the flood, he might have joined the shouting wailing chorus, to sob until he fell asleep like a drunken man, had not his own unhappiness been beyond hysteria. But he had lost more than in one else there unless, as was possible, some other local god had also been enslaved. In the darkness Loa's face bore an expression of puzzled thought. So hard was he trying to think that he remained unfettered by the rhythm around him. For until to-day Loa had been a god ever since he could remember. When he was seven years old, eighteen years ago, a strange sickness, a mysterious magic, had descended upon the town. Almost everyone had suffered from it, and nearly everyone who suffered from it had died. Nasa, Loa's father, had died. Pustul's had formed to cover his body, and he had uttered words that had no meaning, and then he had died, quickly. His brothers had died, his wives and his children had died. In every house more people had died than lived, and in some houses everyone died. Loa himself had sickened. He bore on his forehead and on other parts of his body the hollow marks, greyish in the chocolate brown skin of the

pustules which had formed there. But Loa had lived through it, lived to find himself the sole survivor of the house of Nasa, a god unquestioned. Upon him had devolved the duty of seeing that Nasa and Nasa's fathers before him were supplied with attendants consonant with their dignity. It was he who had to recall the errant moon from the arms of the river, it was he who had to ascertain, by virtue of his divine powers, who were the miscreants of the town, and it was he who, by his mere existence, had to ensure the prosperity and happiness of his people. The few surviving old people—Indeharu, whose skull had been beaten in that morning by a knobbed club, was the last of them—had been able to tell Loa about all this when he was a child. And the younger women had borne children, and the immature had reached maturity and become fathers and mothers. The young men who had taken wives lately had been born after the sickness, and their wives long after, and they had never known any other god than Loa; they knew of the dread majesty of Nasa, whose name none but Loa might pronounce, and they saw people sent to serve him and his majestic predecessors, and the knowledge increased their awe. They knew that Loa was brother to the sky and the forest, that the moon was his sister and the sun his brother.

Loa had never had reason to doubt any of this himself. What he wanted was his; he owned the whole world, which meant his town. The forest round it, with its little people and its vague hints of other peoples, was merely a setting for the town, a chaos in which his world hung suspended, and a chaos, moreover, which was his own brother. He knew of the effectiveness of his powers of divination as positively as he knew that hair grew on the top of his head. There had never been in his mind the least doubt about his divinity, and of course there had never been the least threat to it. He had never been aware of any limitations encompassing himself because he had never sought any. A world of continuous sufficiency of food, of an almost complete absence of danger, a world of no ambitions and no disappointments was not a world favourable to metaphysical speculation. A red ant could bite him, although he was a god; this was a world in which red ants could bite gods, and it was not a world in which one inquired into the relative natures of red ants and gods.

This was true only up to this morning, and now everything was different. Loa sat with his fellow captives wailing round him, trying to fit his new self into this new world, while his mind, utterly unused to logic, was weighted down in addition by the grave handicap of a clumsy language. His clubbings of the morning had kept him somewhat dazed until now, but their effect was wearing off at the same time as hunger was stimulating his thoughts. Although he did not join in the rhythmic wailings about him, he yet heard them, and they worked upon him.

His genuine sorrow at the destruction of the town moved him inexpressibly, and he knew now that hunger could gnaw at his divinity, and that knob-kerries could smite it and hippopotamus-hide whips could cut into it. Yet it was not easy for the habits of thought of a lifetime to be discarded. Having almost come to grips with reality, Loa turned a little light-headed, thanks largely to hunger and the beat of the rhythmic wailing on his brain. It was his brother the sky who had betrayed him; he had always distrusted the sky, and now his distrust was justified and his perspicacity demonstrated. The sky had extended help to his enemies; it was by the aid of the sky, encamped as they were under its protection, that they had been able to enslave him. A little deliriously Loa vowed vengeance on his treacherous brother. He would degrade the sky, he would kill the sky, he would pay back these sufferings of his tenfold. In the midst of these wild thoughts came the memory of his glimpse of Lanu in the forest. Lanu would avenge him if he did not avenge himself. Lanu would continue the line of his divinity. Although Loa kept silent, he was soon as .cstatic and delirious with emotion as Nessi or any other slave about him. When the fit passed he was both drained and weary, like the others, and like the others, he sank into an exhausted sleep, lying motionless under the dark sky with a thousand fellow unfortunates. The mosquitoes and the ants—the myriad insects of Africa—could not break into his comatose slumber, nor could the rocky earth beneath him. He lay like a corpse, and so did Nessi, so that neither of them disturbed the other with tugs at the stick that held them together.

That was a strange bond between them, uniting them and yet keeping them apart. They could never be nearer than five feet to each other, and yet never farther, never out of sight, and yet never

within reach. When Loa woke in the dark dawn, he inevitably awoke Nessi. She gave a sharp cry.

'Ura,' she said, 'where are you?'

Ura was the name of her husband, one of the best of the young hunters. Nessi put her hand up to her neck and the touch of the fork and chain recalled to her the events of yesterday which she had thought momentarily a dream.

'Oh,' she wailed. 'Ah—ee—ai—'

Then she remembered who it was who lay beside her, and she looked round in the gathering light.

'Lord,' she said, 'is it indeed you?'

'It is indeed I,' said Loa.

He was using again the language of a god, and Nessi was addressing him in the language of a remote interior.

'Lord, what will they do with me?'

'You will bear burdens for them,' said Loa, hesitatingly.

It was not an easy question to answer in any event. The conception of slavery had quite died out in Loa's little community. And Loa found it hard to imagine the existence of other communities, or of distances greater than a day's march. But with a prodigious effort of his imagination he was just able to picture the possibility that the slavers, coveting the ivory tusks, had come a long way for them, and needed bearers to carry them back to their town in a far part of the forest. To mere mortals, he knew, wives were desirable property, something to be coveted, but if any slaver intended Nessi as a wife he had shown small disposition to do so as yet.

'Will it be far, Lord?' asked Nessi.

'Very far.'

'How far, Lord?' persisted Nessi, with a child's need for exactitude.

'Many nights, many days,' said Loa, his imagination making a fantastic leap to such a wild idea.

'But you, Lord, you?' said Nessi.

She was only a mortal, and such things might happen to her within the limits of insane possibility, but now she remembered again that Loa was chained in the other fork of her pole, and of course nothing like that could happen to him.

'Doubtless, I shall come too.'

The equatorial dawn had fully broken by now, and the overcast

sky was shining its light down upon them. Nessi looked at Loa, thinking hard. He was as naked as she was, as naked as all the other slaves about her. He had no leopard-skin cloak, and the only reminder of his former greatness was his iron collar and bracelets. And they were talking familiarly together, Nessi with him, and he had just admitted the possibility of being driven like a goat across the country with the others. Her world was a mad place. And people were no longer putting their faces into the dirt for him, and yet were suffering no apparent harm. Ah, that was the point. No apparent harm; but without doubt Loa would summon his secret powers and rend these slave raiders apart when he decided to do so. At the moment he was actuated by motives for delay incomprehensible to mere mortals - a conclusion that satisfied her vague wonderings. Except that she had a lingering wish that Loa's whim for being in temporary subjection had not involved the killing of her baby yesterday.

'Look, Lord,' said Nessi, 'there is food.'

A full wooden trough had been carried down, and already a mob of slaves were milling round it.

'Let us go there,' said Loa, suddenly remembering that he was desperately hungry.

A double handful of tapioca; that was what he got for himself at the trough, and this time he saw to it that he dropped none. He was careful that the people moving from side to side under his nose in response to Nessi's movements did not interfere with his feeding. Pushing round them to get to the trough were many people from his town, mingled with many more whom he had never seen before. It was significant that already the one sort paid him scarcely more attention than the other. They frequently failed to recognize him, chained as he was to Nessi, and when they did it was sometimes with a startled cry and sometimes with nothing more than recognition, so that Loa knew they knew who he was. Chains and nakedness and misery were levelling them all. And Loa's own personal reaction was not too consistent. Sometimes he was sunk in despair, but sometimes his natural curiosity and interest in the world would break through his depression and his bewilderment. Some kind of selection had gone into his breeding. Some ancestor of his must have been markedly different from his fellows to be accepted as king

and god, and the qualities had not been bred out in ensuing generations, for from a mass of people of the royal blood only one received deification, and each god in turn had his choice of the women as a vehicle to continue the royal line. So that even on that first day of captivity by the river Ioa's wits were coming back to normal and beginning to exercise themselves on what he saw.

It was clear that the river and the sky had betrayed him; the raiders had a fleet of canoes with which they could cover great distances and strike without warning. The night before they had attacked his town they had undoubtedly made use of canoes to drop down the river, presumably as far as the rocks from which he was accustomed to summon his sister the moon. He saw a flotilla come back with a few slaves, but with the canoes crammed to the gunwales with food, the result of some raid on another town, he supposed. It was obvious that the problem of supplying the large mass of people encamped by the river was a serious one, and could only be solved by ceaseless raids upon the surrounding country. Moreover, this source of supply would exhaust itself in time, and when that time came the only resource would be for the party to move on, either into some fresh area, or homewards. That was a brilliant piece of deduction on the part of Ioa—uneducated as he was—but in one respect Ioa was well equipped: between childhood and the present day he had had some thorough administrative experience: for in his town when all was said and done he had been ultimately responsible for the economic working of the life of the place down to the smallest detail. The duties had not been onerous, in the absence of any difficulties regarding food or population, but they had opened up channels of thought in his brain which were available for the passage of these new notions.

'Let us go up there,' said Ioa to Nessi, pointing up the steep slope to the village. He did not make use of the greatly superior form of address, but that used by one lofty equal to another—the way Indeharu would have spoken to Vira in the old days, the old days two days ago.

'Let us go,' said Nessi obediently and almost deferentially.

She rose to her feet and they began to plod up the slope, picking their way through the yoked pairs dotted about. This bare rocky

slope was a continuation and expansion of the main street of the village above, whose houses they could see. Like the houses with which Loa had always been familiar, they were built of thick planks split from tree trunks, but they were unfamiliar to Loa in the details of their design.

'Those men are different,' said Nessi, pointing—they were walking at this moment with the pole diagonally across their course, with Nessi on Loa's left front. By this arrangement it was more convenient to talk, and the pole was not such a nuisance as it was if they walked side by side.

'They are indeed different,' agreed Loa.

Nessi had pointed to two armed men lounging by the entrance to the village: they were dark brown rather than the deep black of the spearmen and they carried shields of plaited reeds, and short stout bows with a few arrows whose heads were wrapped in leaves—poisoned arrows, therefore—altogether, in colour and weapons, resembling the men of Loa's town rather than the strange barbarians who had captured them. But they were just as hostile.

'Go away!' shouted one of them as they approached, and, when Nessi and Loa still advanced, he put an arrow on his bowstring menacingly.

'Go away!' he repeated, leveling the arrow with every intention of drawing and loosing.

'We must turn aside,' said Loa.

From where they stood they could just look up the street. Naked black women were moving about it on domestic duties, carrying wooden jars of water and so on, and they caught a glimpse of a white-robed Arab. Then Loa led Nessi along the top of the slope, high above the river. On their left hand were the old village clearings, the usual wild tangle of stumps and creepers, so dense that even a single agile man would have difficulty in picking his way through; a yoked couple could never do it. Strangulation or a broken neck would be the fate of one or both of them before they had penetrated ten yards—there was no escape in this direction. At the far end of the clearing the rocky slope had narrowed down to a few yards, and there the forest began, with the path by which they had come. Here lounged two more men with shields and bows. There was no word in Loa's limited vocabulary for 'sentries.' He had to think of

them by the elaborate circumlocution of 'men who wait to stop other people passing,' but at least that exactly described them.

'Turn back,' said one of them as Loa and Nessi drew near.

He was as ready to shoot as had been his colleague at the other end of the clearing, and the whole width of the gap, from where the clearing ended to the water's edge, was no more than fifty yards. Moreover, the spaces between the trees, Loa saw, were closed by a double row of pointed stakes, leaving only the path free. There was no way of escape this way, either. They were on the water's edge here, where the river ran, golden-brown, its otherwise smooth surface disturbed here and there by the ripples and eddies of its progress. Far out, a huge tree was being carried rapidly down, now and again turning over and round, raising fresh branches and roots towards the sky as it went. Loa saw the gaunt limbs raised in silent and unavailing appeal to the sky, and he was shaken by fresh emotion. He was as helpless as that tree trunk.

'May you die!' he suddenly shouted at the sentries.

He shook his fist at them in rage. 'May the howels of your children rot! May---'

'Oh, let us run away,' said Nessi, for one of the sentries was coming towards them menacingly. 'Come!'

Nessi tried to run, and when the pull of the chain choked her she put her hands up to it to hold it clear of her windpipe and plunged forward, dragging Loa with her.

'Oh, quickly!' said Nessi.

Her panic infected Loa, and they ran back to lose themselves among the crowded couples along the water's edge, the chains of the yoke dragging at their necks when the irregularities of the ground made them diverge or converge a little.

CHAPTER

7

IT WAS A STRANGE BOND BETWEEN THEM, WAS THAT YOKE. IT HELD Loa and Nessi together and yet it kept them apart. They could not even touch each other with outstretched finger-tips, and yet neither of them could move a yard without not merely the consent but the co-operation of the other. They could never be out of each other's sight or hearing; there was nothing the one could do without the other being aware of it. If one should fall, the other suffered equally. It compelled each to walk with due attention to the other's well-being. When they lay down to sleep on the unlevel ground it was necessary for each to see that the other was comfortable; if one should roll over or slip a little down the slope the other had perforce to conform. They had to be brave together, or timorous together. One could not be restless or try to explore if the other were torpid nor could the torpid one remain torpid—each had to sink or rise to the other's level of activity. Because of the yoke Loa and Nessi experienced all the disadvantages of intimacy and enjoyed none of the advantages. They could easily make each other uncomfortable and unhappy, but it was almost impossible to make each other comfortable or to console each other. They could not even speak to each other privately—at that distance apart they must needs talk loudly enough for others to hear. All their secrets they must share with each other, and yet they could have no secrets unshared with the world.

For husband and wife, for two people who had long been intimate, the yoke would have caused difficulties enough; but Loa and Nessi had hardly known each other. Loa had been the god, immense and unapproachable, before whom Nessi had to prostrate herself; Nessi had been a pretty wench that chance had never before thrown his way. He knew much more about her now—he knew just how

her head was set on her shoulders and how her arms swung as she walked. Looking round the pole he learned all about her back and thighs, as the day lengthened he watched the gradual fading of the weals left by the kurbash. She was a fine figure of a woman, of the slender type which Loa favored (unlike most of his fellows), with good muscles that showed to advantage under her skin when she set herself to climb a slope. Yet she was eternally out of his reach.

It was obvious to Loa by the end of the day that no ordinary attempt at escape would succeed, the simple precautions taken by the raiders, and their centuries of experience in the handling of newly captured slaves, made it quite impossible to get away. The yoke was as important an invention as the kurbash in the Arab subjugation of Central Africa: it was by means of these two instruments that a handful of spearmen and bowmen were able to keep a thousand captives under control.

Keeping everyone stark naked was another simple means of maintaining dominance. A naked man or woman cannot conceal a weapon, or a tool to assist in escape, or a food reserve to be used in the event of escape. It reduced to some extent, too, the chances of infectious disease and of skin parasites being spread through the camp, but, more than anything else, the mere fact of nakedness was a repressive factor, in the simple communities from which the slaves had been taken nakedness was nothing to excite comment in itself. Nakedness implied poverty or helplessness: for clothing was a matter of ornament and hardly one of protection, and nothing to do with modesty. The naked man or woman felt more useless and helpless and was therefore more easily kept in slavery.

Perhaps the meagreness of their rations doled out helped—no spirit could remain high when only sustained by two double handfuls of tapioca a day. Already Loa was hungry, and he grew hungrier as the days passed. Never at the other end of the pole wept with hunger. Never in her life had her belly gone unfilled: usually it had been unsatisfied on a diet exclusively of starch,—but never unfilled until now. She wanted to join the wistful groups hanging hopelessly round the feeding troughs, and she was inclined to sulk when Loa objected. Loa would rather sit on a lofty point of the encampment and survey the scene around him. He could force

himself now to endure the unwinking gaze of the sky, to stare across the mysterious river at the distant shore the other side, and he was interested in observing the behaviour of his guards. The mumbo-jumbo of the Moslems, their ablutions and their prostrations, interested him. He was sharp enough to guess that these formalities were in honour of some god, but he could not guess which god it was. It was more than could be expected of his uneducated mind that it should develop a good working theory regarding comparative religion, but having been a god himself made him something of a practical theologian. Stirring in the dark recesses of Loa's mind there were some curious thoughts, and there was a stern conflict going on. When a man who has always thought of himself as a god begins to have atheistical doubts the conflict is bound to be severe. Loa might well have gone insane if his interest had not been caught by his surroundings--if, for instance, Nessi's whims and moods had not kept him busy, and if he had not been wondering about escaping.

The majority of his fellow captives were apathetic in their misery, content to hang round the feeding troughs or merely sit staring at vacancy. There were a few active spirits, but not many, and the kurbash kept them in check. And if the kurbash did not achieve its end there was another punishment possible. Loa never knew what was the crime of the two of his fellow slaves who suffered the death penalty. They may have tried to escape, or they may have gone insane and struck a Moslem. No one really knew, but everyone knew how they died, for they were perched upon stakes of impalement in the centre of the encampment, and there they stayed, screaming throughout one long day, screaming at first so loudly that they could be heard from one end of the camp to the other. Later the screams died down to delirious moans. Loa knew about inflicting death; he had killed people in cold blood himself. And he knew about casual cruelty, the result of carelessness or indifference. But deliberate cruelty of this frightful kind was something new to him. He sat and watched under lowering eyebrows the writhings of the tortured men. It was all part of his education. He had never had to keep men in subjugation--allegiance to him had been voluntary, so ingrained by habit and tradition as to be classed as instinctive--but now he knew how it was done.

There was no attempt at organized sanitation in the camp, and the stench and the flies were consequently appalling; the deluges of tropical rain that fell were welcome in one way, as washing away the filth that lay everywhere, but they added to everyone's discomfort all the same. The naked peoples of Central Africa, like naked people in most parts of the world, detest the impact of rain upon their skin. The slaves tried to huddle together during the storms; Nessi would sit in close embrace with a dozen men and women whose yokemates similarly tried to huddle together at the other end of their poles, all whimpering in chorus, each trying to shelter himself from the pitiless downpour at the expense of the others. But Loa the god sat apart and indifferent (except when Nessi's withings, communicated through the pole, jerked him off his balance), while the thunder of his brother the sky raved overhead, and the thick clouds obscured the face of his brother the sun so that for a time it was as dark as twilight. He bore the unpleasant nagging of the heavy raindrops on his skin with some kind of stoicism; stripped of his divine dignities he was clinging to his personal dignity—about which he had hardly thought before.

There came a day when the whole camp moved off, when the kurbash bit into dark flesh as the raiders herded the slaves into order, when shouts and cries and blows drove the slaves first here and then there in obedience to their masters. Loa and Nessi found themselves loaded again with an elephant's tusk— not likely to be the one they had borne on their first day, but one as heavy and as bulky. It was slung to their pole in loops of cane, and then they were directed in the footsteps of those who had preceded them, up the slope to the village, along the main street, and out at the other end to a forest path well trodden already.

'Where are we going, Lord?' asked Nessi. She still called him 'Lord,' and used the honorific mode of address when she asked him questions.

'To their town, without doubt,' said Loa with a bland assumption of certitude. He wished he knew.

'And when we arrive there, Lord?'

'Some man will make you his wife.'

Loa really thought it was more likely that Nessi would eventually be eaten, for that was the fate of wanderers in the world he knew— a

few days of rest, and then the axe or the cold and the roasting spit. But he did not reveal his thoughts to her.

‘Will a black man make me his wife, Loid?’

‘Yes. You will dwell in his house, and for him you will cook the plantains and prepare the manioc. By him you will have children.’

‘Ah!’ said Nessi. Such a prospect, after her recent experiences, reconciled her to her fate, which was what Loa was aiming at. He had had enough of her misery.

The forest, the dark silent friendly forest, had already enfolded them. The tusk that swung from their pole was heavy and hard to manage, and already the yoke and chain were galling their shoulders. Ahead of them and behind them serpentine the long line of yoked couples, each bearing burdens, sometimes slung from the poles, sometimes carried on the head. At intervals along the line walked the guards, and at rarer intervals still were the Arabs, the few representatives of an alien culture who by virtue of that culture dominated this vast assembly of human beings. The African spear-men and bowmen who were their paid mercenaries could be trusted to see that the slaves did not attempt to escape, but could be trusted very little farther, for they, too, had led the carefree life of the forest and knew not to-morrow. They could never be impressed with the necessity for keeping the line closed up, for hurrying the march, for planning each day’s journey from one source of food supply to the next. In consequence the Arab leaders were busy all the time, listening up and down the line, upbraiding their mercenaries, flogging the slaves forward with their whips, and stationing themselves at difficult points, where the march was necessarily checked, in order to minimize delays and hurry everyone forward again as soon as possible.

Soon Loa and Nessi were running with sweat, soon weariness began to creep over them as they plodded on through the forest, up and down its scarcely perceptible undulations, over its dry leaf-mould, across its boggy valleys. From far, far overhead the subdued green light filtered down, from where the creepers tangled together, where the monkeys played and the parrots shrieked. Nessi’s step was shortening, a gap was opening between her and the yoked pair next ahead. Very soon an Arab appeared beside them.

'Go faster!' he said, and he caught Nessi a cut with his whip that drew a yelp from her and quickened her pace.

'Faster!' he repeated, with another cut. Then the whip burned across Loa's shoulders so that he lunged forward pushing Nessi ahead. Nessi half ran, half waded until she was up to the plover in front of her, but she had hardly reached them before her step began to shorten again. Almost at once the Arab—he was a man of a strange mixture of races, with a straggling black moustache and rings in his ears—was beside them again.

'Did I not say go faster?' he demanded, pointing to the gap that had opened ahead of Nessi. 'Faster! Faster!'

At each word the whip fell, first upon Nessi and then upon Loa. Loa felt the sudden pain, and sprang forwards so that Nessi stumbled and the end of the tusk struck him in the stomach.

'Hurry!' snarled the Arab, making his kurbash sing in the air. On this, the first day of the march of the united column, the Arabs were determined to instil into the minds of their captives the dire necessity for keeping closed up.

Loa learned the lesson at once, linked as it was with the lesson that the hippopotamus-hide whip could inflict pain upon the person of his divine majesty. He kept watch now beyond Nessi to see that the gap did not open again, and when it showed signs of doing so he pressed forward with his neck against the yoke to compel Nessi to maintain her pace; by tensing his throat muscles he had found that he could bear the pressure against his windpipe for some seconds.

'You go too slowly, Nessi,' he said.

'Oh Lord! Oh Lord!' wailed Nessi.

Later in the day came a blessed respite, when some delay ahead jammed the column. Nessi found herself stumbling against the couple ahead, who had halted—they were two burly young women, each with a bundle on her head and each with her lips distorted by scarring. They scowled round at Nessi, but Nessi fell incontinently to the ground oblivious to everything except the fact that at the moment she did not have to walk any more. The young women lowered themselves into a sitting position without taking the loads from their heads—it was less trouble to sit with stiff necks and poised heads than to lay the heavy weights on the ground and

subsequently have to hoist them up again. Loa squatted too so that the tusk lay along the ground. Far too soon they heard movement ahead of them in the forest, shouts and cries and bustle. The couples ahead of them were getting to their feet in succession and moving on as the Arab came down the line. The two women with the scarred lips rose carefully to their feet, swaying gracefully as they kept their bundles balanced, but Nessi still lay face downward sobbing. The women moved on on the heels of the couple ahead of them at the same moment as the Arab arrived. Loa had seen him coming, and was as much on his feet as he could be with Nessi lying on the ground and the tusk so precariously in its slings between them. He wanted to look ready to march, for he had learned the lesson that the kurbash hurts. The Arab took in the situation at a glance, and once again his whip drew a scream from Nessi. Even then it took a second cut to get her on her feet, although once up she hurried instantly forward. Loa debated within himself the argument that Nessi had lain on the ground for an extra period of about two breaths, at the expense of two cuts with the kurbash. It was much too big a price to pay, he decided. Yet it was like a woman to pay too much for the satisfaction of having her own way—it was the sort of thing Musini did in the old days.

Musini! Loa had hardly thought about her since the raiding of the village. He knew she was not a prisoner, and he had no reason to believe she was dead. He knew, or he almost knew, in his half-delirious state, that Lanu his son was free, and the obvious assumption was that Musini was free too. Musini had had some narrow escapes. She would have been sent to serve his ancestors if it had not been for the opportune arrival of the woman Delli to whose tales of the raiders they should have paid more attention, instead of promptly sacrificing her as they did. Musini; his first wife, the mother of his son, ageing now, yet full of fire and personality surprising in a woman well past twenty years of age. Perhaps he never would have sent her to serve his ancestors, even if Delli had not come, even if she had always continued her disturbing behaviour. Nessi was saying something to him as she plodded on in front of him, but he paid little attention, so preoccupied was he with his thoughts of Musini. There was Musini over there, just visible through the trees, and a boy by her side—Lanu. It was all so matter

of course that for a moment Loa did not realize the startling implications of what he saw. Musini stepped out from behind a tree and waved an arm. Musini without a doubt—Loa stared at her so hard that he did not pay attention to his footing; he stumbled over a root and with difficulty saved himself from falling.

'I am choked,' said Nessi, peevishly, when she recovered from the jerk of the chain against her throat. 'Cannot you walk with more care?'

It sounded as if she were addressing her husband rather than the god Loa, but Loa had no ears for her. Already the few steps he had taken had changed all the lines of visibility between the trees of the forest; he was already doubtful about just where he had seen Musini, and he could see nothing now either of her or of Lanu. Loa's heart, working hard because of the heat and the exertions of his body, was now pumping harder than ever, seeming to fill his breast so that he could not inflate his lungs. He stumbled again.

'What is the matter with you?' snapped Nessi. 'That is the second time you have choked me.'

The complaining voice pierced through Loa's preoccupation.

'May hairy devils pull off your arms and legs,' he said.

The god Loa had never used or contemplated using curses; in the old days he had ridden as serenely above such earthly things as his sister the moon had ridden serenely above the clouds—the expression he had just used he had overheard at some time or other and stored in his subconscious memory, and now it had come from his lips like the words used by a gently nurtured woman of our day under an anæsthetic.

'And may red ants burrow into your belly,' retorted Nessi.

Presumably all the way along the line of slaves there were violent quarrels—no couple could spend days tied at opposite ends of a stick without quarrelling, unless they were utterly sunk in apathy. Loa did not continue this unseemly exchange of ill wishes; even if he had known any more curses he was too busy trying to look over his right shoulder for Lanu and Musini again. But the path he was following wound about with nothing to call attention to its windings, and the fact that he had first seen them over his right shoulder did not mean at all that they were in that relative direction now.

'Oh, walk more steadily,' nagged Nessi. 'I am so weary. The pole chafes my shoulders.'

Loa paid no attention, and the exasperated Nessi reached up with her hands and took hold of the ends of the fork and gave them a maddening tug, so that the chain at Loa's end rasped violently against the nape of his neck.

'Do not do that!' he said, roused once more to awareness of his surroundings.

'I will do it! I want to do it!' said Nessi. 'You make my way hard for me, and I shall make yours hard for you.'

And with that she tugged at the yoke again, exasperating Loa so that he in his turn took hold of the pole and shook it, battering Nessi's fork against the back of her head.

'You hurt me!' shrieked Nessi, but that was just what Loa wanted to do. He thought darkly for a moment of twisting the pole and strangling Nessi as she stood, until he realized that he could not do that without strangling himself. So he made his neck muscles rigid and contented himself with poking Nessi in the back of the neck with the fork. A frightful pain across his shoulders made him stop; the Arab had come up beside them and was cutting at them with his whip.

'Not that!' snarled the Arab.

He gave Loa two more cuts for good measure and then transferred his attentions to Nessi. She screamed as the kurbash bit into her thighs—her back was screened by the tusk slung from the pole. Loa heard the screams and saw the angry welts appear on her thighs, with intense satisfaction.

'Now go on in peace,' said the Arab, with a stupid misuse of a forest idiom, but his meaning was clear enough. They went on, with Nessi weeping and wailing over her sorrows, and Loa more and more irritated by her.

In the late afternoon the march came to an end, in the main street of a deserted village. Here there was none of the ample space which had been available at the original encampment. Instead the slaves were herded into the street and packed tight, filling the whole area between the two rows of houses. Loa found himself jostled and surrounded by strange men and women, some of the latter with footsore children running at their sides. A babel of

sound went up around him, accompanied by the stench of sweating bodies.

'Is this their town?' asked Nessi, bewildered, through the din.

'I do not know,' said Loa, but Nessi had not waited for a reply. She cast herself upon the ground completely exhausted, and so did the other slaves—poles, arms, legs and bundles all jumbled together.

An hour later, with evening at hand, there was an eddy in the crowd. Two slaves were walking through the press with a feeding trough on their shoulders; they were escorted by a group of Arabs and mercenaries who slashed right and left with sticks and whips to restrain the eager mob. A double handful of cooked plantain each; it called for many troughs to supply even that moderate ration, but they were correspondingly quickly emptied, and brought round again filled with water. The slaves drank from them like animals, and then, hunger and thirst to some extent allayed, they could lie down again, in their own and in each other's filth, to sleep, higgledy piggledy, like animals, with heads pillowed on bosoms or thighs; and when it rained, as it did twice during the night, trying (as well as poles and chains and loads permitted) to huddle together closer. Around them, during the hours of darkness, a few of the raiders kept guard.

CHAPTER

8

IT WAS STILL DARK WHEN THE SLAVES ON THE FRINGE OF THE CROWD were roused next day; it was hardly after dawn when it was Nessi's and Loa's turn to move off after them. There was a running stream at which they could kneel to drink, at the end of the village, and there were troughs of food prepared from which they could each take their double handful to eat as they walked along. Loa had to rest his hands on the pole so as to eat out of them. The same endless march, the same heat and weariness and misery. The torment of flies and mosquitoes; the hurried mouthfuls of water snatched as they forded the streams. The whips of the Arabs, the sticks of their mercenaries. The same march, the same torments, the same whips, day following day, until the day of deliverance. No slave counted the days.

The man beside whom Loa had slept had entertained him for a brief while with an account of something he had seen the previous day - he talked freely to Loa whom he was addressing in ignorance of his status. (It might not have been different had he known.) During the march this man had seen a forest antelope, bewildered at the passage of so many men and women, dashing between the trees and then coming to a startled full stop. An Arab was close beside Loa's informant. He had put his gun to his shoulder - the man's pantomime was vivid - and then *boom!* The antelope had fallen down dead. Dead, quite dead, with the blood running from his side and his mouth. Dead, killed at a distance no arrow could be impelled over, killed by the bang and the puff of strange-smelling smoke. The memory of the story gave Loa something to think about as he plodded along behind Nessi. It was a strange power these grey-faced men had. With the bow and the poisoned arrow Loa had been familiar all his life, of course. And he had killed men with an unseen

force—more than once he had told men that he was at enmity with them, and that had been enough to make those men waste away and die. But forest antelopes, like parrots and monkeys and red ants, were not subject to his power. Even a man took long days to die. He did not fall bleeding as that forest antelope had done according to the narrator—as the men had done that Delli had told about. Loa knew the limitations on his powers; these men could do something he could not do. It was a disturbing thought; if they were only men, then what was he?

Here, at a point where the trail made a sharp bend, was an Arab, standing with the stream of slaves flowing past him as he supervised the march with his kurbash flicking in his hand. At sight of him Loa took care to pick his steps carefully so as not to stumble and invite a blow—he had learned much during these dreadful days. And as he approached he heard the high-pitched twang of a bow-string. He did not see the flight of the missile, but he was instantly conscious of it when it reached its mark. He saw it strike, hitting the Arab just below the jaw, where face and neck meet; Loa was within a few yards of the Arab when it happened. The Arab did not stagger, he put up his hand with surprise and took hold of the barbed arrow as it hung down on his shoulder from his face. Some red blood—only a few drops—dripped from the wound. The Arab swung round to see who had attacked him, reaching at the same time for the gun which hung by a strap over his shoulder. But he was unsteady on his feet now; his knees bent under him, and although he braced himself up for a moment they gave way again, and he fell on his face, moving only feebly as Nessi and Loa reached him. Arrow poison works fast when injected into the trunk of the body rather than in a limb, and fastest of all in the blood vessels of the neck. Two people came leaping across the glade to where Nessi and Loa stood by the body. One was little Lanu, his left hand grasping his three-foot bow and an arrow; his right hand held yet another arrow with the bow string in the notch, ready to draw and loose. And with him ran Musini, naked, with her long breasts swinging in front of her; in her hand she bore Lanu's ceremonial battleaxe, the little axe which Litti the smith had made for him at Loa's special request. The bright edge gleamed in the twilight of the forest. Musini's eyes met Loa's. She momentarily clapped her hand to her

forehead in salutation, but she allowed no ceremonial to delay her in the course of action she had planned. She hacked with her axe at the creepers which suspended the load from the pole; they were tough and did not part easily, but Musini slashed away with all the considerable strength of her skinny arms until the elephant's tusk fell to the ground, relieving Loa and Nessi of its considerable weight. No word had yet been spoken. Musini now turned the edge of the axe against the pole which connected the two prisoners. Twice she hacked at it, but it was of a tough elastic wood with a hard surface, it bent under her blows and the axe rebounded from it having made hardly a dent.

'I nough, Mother,' squealed Lanu. He was standing with his arrow half drawn, looking sharply to left and to right beside the dying Arab. 'We must not wait.'

'Come, Lord, come, you,' said Musini.

As Nessi still stood bewildered Musini reached out her hand and took Nessi's, and turned to run through the forest, with Loa lumbering after her. Some of the other slaves made a move to follow them, but Lanu checked them.

'Back!' he shouted in his high voice, threatening them with his arrow. 'Back!'

He drew away from the surging knot of slaves and then turned and ran at top speed after the others; Loa running over the spongy unequal ground with the yoke pounding on his shoulders, looked down to find Lanu running beside him. Lanu extended a hand to him, as Musini had done to Nessi, as if to drag his big bulk along after him. Somebody—either Nessi or Loa—tripped and stumbled, and the pair of them fell crashing to the ground, the yokes and chains lacerating their necks, the breath driven from their bodies.

'Come on, come on,' shrieked Lanu, dancing beside them.

They scrambled to their feet and Musini seized the bewildered Nessi's hand again and dragged her forward. They heard a shout far behind them—muffled as it reached their ears through the trees—and knew that pursuit had commenced.

'Run, oh, run!' pleaded Musini.

And so they ran through the forest, through the twilight, between the great friendly trunks of the trees. They came to a little brook flowing between wide marshy banks; the mud was half-way up their

thighs as they made their way through. It slowed them, but it did not stop them, and, once across, they resumed their heart-breaking pace and kept it up until Nessi began to wail, little short sounds which were all her breathless condition allowed. Her pace slackened until they were obliged to stop and allow her to fall gasping on the ground. Loa fell too, his breath coming heavily, and his legs aching. Musini was content to squat beside him, while Lanu was still sufficiently fresh to make his way back, bow and arrow in hand, to peer through the trees so as to be able to give warning in case of pursuit.

After a few seconds Loa was able to raise his head, and his eyes met those of Musini beside him.

'Is it well with you, Lord?' she asked. She used the honorific mode of address which she had not used in the days when Loa was god and king— and her wrinkled face bore a fond smile. She put out a hand and caressed Loa's sweating shoulder.

'It is well with me,' said Loa.

To Loa's credit, Musini's affection took him by surprise. His fall from divinity had left him with little belief in himself. People had served him when he was a god presumably because that was what he was. Now that he was a naked, worthless slave he was surprised and touched that anyone, even skinny wrinkled Musini, should serve him and love him for himself alone.

'My face is bright at seeing you again, Lord,' said Musini, and there was some literal truth in the trite metaphor, as a glance at her showed.

A faint cry from the end of the glade forestalled Loa's reply; Lanu was running back to them, and his gestures warned them of pursuit.

'We must run,' said Musini, getting to her feet. 'Rise up, you.'

The last words were addressed to the gasping Nessi, and when the latter made no further response than a groan Musini kicked her in the ribs with her tough bare foot.

'Stand up!' shrieked Musini, and took Nessi by the hair to drag her to her feet. The axe swung in Musini's other hand, and she shot a glance at Loa. 'Shall I cut off her head? Then we would not have to take her with us, Lord.'

'No, she bears one end of the pole,' said Loa—a perfectly sound

argument, although it is just possible that Loa was actuated by other motives than immediate expediency.

Lanu had reached them by now.

'Come on!' he squeaked.

Nessi had risen to her feet, perhaps as a result of Musini's grim suggestion, and Lanu took one of her hands, and Musini the other, and they began to run again, with weary legs moving stiffly at first, running and running, with a weariness that grew until it seemed impossible even once again to put one foot in front of the other, and when they could not run they walked, with steps that grew slower and shorter as the day went on, as the twilight of the forest deepened with the coming of night.

'Now we can rest at last,' said Musini in the end, when it was growing too dark to see even the ground under their feet.

They stopped, and Nessi settled what Loa was going to do by dropping flat to the ground where she stood, so that Loa was dragged down too. With the coming of darkness there was no chance of the Arabs continuing their pursuit. He was safe and he was free.

'To-morrow, with the first light, we shall release you from this chain and yoke, Lord,' said Musini.

She put out her hands in the darkness and felt for Loa's chafed neck. The touch was marvellously soothing; Loa found himself stroking Musini's skinny arms.

'I am hungry,' said Nessi, suddenly. 'Oh, I am very hungry. I wish I could eat.'

'Shut that howling mouth,' said Musini. She was utterly scandalized, as her tone showed, by the familiarity of Nessi's manner of address.

'But I am hungry,' protested Nessi.

'Hungry you are and hungry you will remain,' was all the sympathy Musini had to offer. 'There is nothing to eat now. There have been many days when Lanu and I have eaten nothing.'

'There is nothing to eat?' asked Loa. With this turn of the conversation he was now sleepily conscious of the hunger that possessed him.

'For you, Lord, there is this,' said Musini.

She fumbled in the darkness, presumably in the little bag which

hung from her neck between her breasts, and then she found Loa's hand and pressed something into it.

'What is this?' he asked.

'White ants, Lord, all we have. I gathered them this morning.'

White ants lived in little tunnels in dead trees, harmless creatures enough, quite unlike their ferocious red and black brothers. Their bodies were succulent and could be eaten by hungry people; but these ants had been long dead, crushed into a paste by Musini's fingers and carried all day in her little bag. There was only a couple of mouthfuls of them anyway; Loa chewed the bitter unsatisfying stuff and swallowed it down with a fleeting regret for the double handful of tapioca which had been served out to him that morning.

'It is hard to gather food in the forest,' said Lanu.

'That is so,' agreed Musini. 'Yet has Lanu been clever. He has been like a man, Lord. It was Lanu who made the bow and the arrows. Lanu is our worthy son.'

'It was I who killed the grey-faced man,' said Lanu. 'Did you see him fall? My arrow was in his throat, where I had aimed it. It was I who made the poison. I used the creeper juice. I made it as I had seen Tiri the son of Minu make it.'

'It was well done, son,' said Loa. 'And how was it you came to escape when first the Arabs came to the town?'

They told him between them, Musini and Lanu, of their adventures on the day of the raid and since then. They had fled into the clearing at the first alarm, together, for Lanu had been sleeping in his mother's house. Lanu had snatched up and borne with him his little ceremonial axe, his latest present from his father, and it had stood them in good stead. Without it they would have been nearly helpless in the forest, but with it they had the power that edged steel conveys. Lanu had shaped and trimmed the bow; Musini had braided the bowstring from the flexible creeper fibres. They had followed the slave caravan from camp to camp, living on what they could gather in the forest. With vigilance and precaution they had escaped the snares of the little people, although twice arrows aimed at them had narrowly missed one or other of them. Every day at some time or other they had seen Loa, far more often than he had seen them, and by continual watching they had made themselves

familiar with the Arabs' methods so that eventually they had planned the rescue and carried it out successfully.

'That was well done indeed, my son,' said Loa.

There were the strangest feelings inside him at that moment, the oddest misgivings. Lanu was a clever little boy, but it could not have been Lanu who was responsible for all this. Lanu could not have displayed the singleness of purpose, the resolution and the ingenuity which had resulted in his rescue. Lanu might have loved his father, but – Loa's new-found humility asserted itself – it was incredible that he would have gone through all that risk and labour to rescue him except at the instance of his mother. It must have been Musini who did the planning and who showed the resolution. It must have been Musini's devotion which had kept them to the task. An odd state of affairs indeed, when women should thus display initiative and determination; there was something unnatural and disturbing in the thought of it.

And it was disturbing in a different way to think of Musini's devotion. In the time of his divinity Loa would have thought nothing of someone running risks to help him, or even to contribute slightly to his comfort; but since that time Loa had been in contact with a new reality. It was not a god whom Musini had rescued – Loa faced the fact squarely – but a slave, a slave in bonds, a worthless chattel. It could not have been from religious conviction that Musini had exerted herself thus. It was Loa the man and not Loa the god whom she had rescued. There must be a personal tie. All this was terribly difficult to work out in Loa's untrained brain and with his limited vocabulary. Loa, the man with forty wives, knew almost nothing of love until now. He was facing something nearly as new as he had done when he first felt doubts about being a god. It called for a fresh orientation of himself. Thanks to his recent experiences Loa found difficulty in swallowing the undoubted fact that Musini must love him for himself alone. He could not take it sublimely for granted. His exhausted brain grappled feebly with all these astonishing developments, with the new phenomenon of love, with the concept of women being capable of decisive action, and then it shrank back exhausted from the encounter.

'I am thirsty as well as hungry,' said Nessi.

She was voicing everyone's sentiments, but that did not help her.

'Did I not say shut that mouth?' snapped Musini. 'Let us sleep, for we are weary.'

The blackest possible night was round them, the darkness of night in the forest, when the hand could not be seen before the face. Beneath them the leaf mould was soggy and damp; around them the stifling hot moist air was not stirred by the slightest breeze. Nessi had petulantly flung herself prone at Musini's rebuke, with a jerk at the pole which had forced Loa to change his position. He tried to settle himself again; Musini's arms found him and pillowed his head upon her shoulder regardless of the discomfort the yoke and chain brought her. They slept in a huddled group, bitten by insects, with the sweat running irritatingly over their naked skins until the chill of dawn crept through the trees, momentarily bringing a coolness that was pleasant until it broke through their sleep to set them shivering and huddling even closer together.

CHAPTER

9

IN THE GREY TWILIGHT IT WAS MUINI WHO PROPOSED THE FIRST move of the day.

'Now let us take off this yoke from your neck. Lord, she said. Lanu, come and see what must be done.'

The yoke was of tough elastic wood; the few links of chain were stoutly attached by staples driven deep into the cart. Lanu tugged at them as Lot had often done, and equally unavailingly.

'You must cut through the wood, son,' suggested Lot.

It was not so easy to do with an axe, although with a knife it would have been comparatively simple. Loa could be of no help, all he could do was to sit as still as he could on the ground while Lanu chipped away at the end of the yoke, with Muini holding it steady in desperate anxiety that expressed itself in fierce curses at Nessi at the other end of the yoke lest he should move. Lanu removed chip after chip; the edge of the axe found a crack in the end of the pole and enabled him to lever off a larger chip still. Eventually both limbs of one of the staples were exposed over most of their length.

'Try to pull that out now,' said Lanu, speaking as one man speaks to another.

Loa put one hand to the chain and one to the yoke, tugging with all the strength the awkward position allowed. The veins stood out on his forehead; he tugged and he tugged, and suddenly the staple flew out. Loa dropped chain and yoke and stepped out, free of his bonds. It was a strange sensation. He could look at Nessi still held at her end; he could look at her from different angles, and at different distances, and he could step further and thither without any thought for her. The feel of his free neck and shoulders was almost unnatural. He lived in his sense of freedom and Lanu

danced with him. A great wave of paternal affection surged up in Loa. Lanu was no little boy now, recent events had made a man of him, child though he was, but Loa loved him. Nessi was watching them, waiting her turn to be set free.

'Now we can go,' said Musini.

She must have forgotten the fact that Nessi was still fastened in her end of the pole; it was only a momentary incident, but it seemed as if Musini intended that she and Loa and Lanu should strike off now through the forest, leaving Nessi to trail the yoke after her until overtaken by inevitable death from starvation or at the hands of the little people. But Loa and Lanu turned and addressed themselves to the task of freeing Nessi at the moment Musini spoke so that the implications of the words passed unnoticed. They chipped away at the yoke until a long pull by Loa tore out the staple, and yoke and chain fell to the ground.

'It is gone!' said Nessi, breathing relief.

She knelt and embraced Loa's knees in thankfulness; it was an immediate change in her demeanour. Yesterday they were fellow slaves, sharing the utter equality of the yoke. To-day the memories of Loa's divinity came flooding back, and Nessi grovelled before him as different as could be imagined from the neceish wench whom he had to placate in the slavers' camp.

'That is well,' said Musini grimly. She had picked up the little axe and was swinging it idly in her hand. 'And now.'

They all four looked at each other.

'And now?' said Musini again.

Four human beings - setting aside for the moment Loa's fictitious divinity - in the immensity of the twilight forest, naked their sole possessions the little axe and the bow which it had helped to shape. Their world of security with its solid past of tradition and seemingly changeless future had been destroyed, and this was the moment of their rebirth into a new world, as if they were babies without parents. Rain in thick heavy drops was falling about them from the dense screen of foliage overhead, monotonous and depressing. They were community dwellers, accustomed all their lives to living in the bustle of a town surrounded by their fellows, bred, moreover, for a hundred generations as community dwellers. The little people wandered in the forest migrating eternally in little groups each no

larger than a family, but Loa and the others were not little people. In each person's mind, even in little Lanu's, there was the longing for a permanent settlement, for houses and plantain groves. Their minds went back miserably to the past and returned empty and longing. All waited for someone else to speak, but Lanu and Musini and Nessi turned their eyes upon Loa. It was not inspiration that came upon him. He was voicing his own sentiments and those of everyone else when he spoke, the words torn from him by his inward yearnings.

Let us go home, he said.

'Home!' echoed Nessi in a fervent sigh.

'Home!' said Lanu with a skip of joy.

For a moment it seemed as if the twilight of the forest had lifted, as if the rain drops had ceased to fall about them. The futility of their existence had ended with the suggestion of a purpose, with a plan for the future. As they thought of home, the thought of the sunlight blazing into the town's street, the cries of the children and the smoke of the cooking fires, that vision died out when they remembered what had happened to the town, and yet something remained to which their minds could cling. There would at least be the site of the clearing overgrown by forest. The banana groves would not yet be overgrown. It was a place they knew, the place where they had spent the whole lives. More than that, the suggestion of going home provided them with an objective. Mere futile wandering in the forest had no appeal for them, home was a goal towards which they could struggle.

'So we will go home,' said Musini, nodding her head significantly, chewing the cud of internal calculations.

She did not have to say more to bring them all back to reality. They were lost in the forest, and they all knew what that meant. To go a mile into the forest—in certain circumstances to go a mere hundred yards—without painful calculations meant being utterly lost, so that one direction seemed as good as any other. And they were separated from home by a march of many days' duration. In the forest they had no means of knowing north or south or east or west, and if they had they still did not know whether home lay to north or to south or to east or to west of them. It was deep in the tradition of the town dweller never on any account to go into

the forest beyond the well-known landmarks. And to all of them the forest was the world; they had no conception of any limits to it. Their minds could not conceive of any area that was not twilit by the shadow of vast trees, steamy hot, and dripped upon by torrential downpours of rain. So that not one of them had the faintest maddest hope—or fear—of ever breaking out of the forest by travelling long enough in the same direction. The world to them was made up of illimitable unknown forest with concealed in the midst of it a tiny patch of known, and therefore friendly and desirable, forest encircling their home.

A rush of feeling surged up in Loa's breast. Courage, it may have been; obstinacy, perhaps; desperation, possibly. He could think of nothing beyond the two alternatives—on the one hand, of determining to make his way home; and on the other, of wandering in futile fashion here in the forest to the end of his days. The first might be mad, unattainable, but at least it was preferable to the second.

'Yes, we will go home,' he said. 'Home! We will find our way there.'

He abandoned himself to the utterly absurd, a fanatic preaching an impossible crusade and sweeping his audience off their feet. He brandished clenched fists at the lowering forest above them and around them.

'Home!' he yelled again.

'Home!' yelled Lanu, waving his bow.

'Home!' said Nessi.

Musini turned upon her.

'And so before we start for home perhaps you will find us food?'

There is food to be found in the forest, enough to support life if one is content to live like a bird, not from day to day but from hour to hour, with almost every waking moment devoted to the search. Fungi grow in the leafmould and on the trunks of decaying trees, from the true mushroom, clean and delicious but rare, to the watery toadstools, foul-smelling but brilliantly coloured, a mouthful of which means death. Intermediate between them come other species of varying degrees of nutritive value and toxicity, all to be noted by a sharp eye when wandering in the forest. There are white ants, not formidable like their black and red cousins, but

harmless, with pulpy bodies that offer a good deal of nutriment when eaten alive, but it takes many, many white ants to make a meal, and it is usually a matter of pure good fortune to open up one of the tunnelled channels along which white ants circulate. If a great number can be caught they can be crushed into a paste which will endure for a couple of days without rotting, making a ration that can be saved for an emergency, but at the price of some of the nutritive qualities lost with the pressed-out juices. There are snakes and frogs; on rare occasions a good archer can bring down a bird or even more rarely a monkey. To secure a forest antelope the forest wanderer must cease for a time to be a wanderer. He must dig a pitfall in a game track and plant a poisoned stake in it and wait maybe for days before an antelope falls into it - it will never happen at all if he does his work clumsily so that the antelope's instincts are aroused and he leaps aside from the too-obvious danger. In the same way if the wanderer has time to spare he can—as the pygmies do—plant poisoned skewers in the track, or conceal a bent bow in the undergrowth with an arrow on the string and a trigger device that can be tripped by a strand of creeper across the path; the same device can actuate a dead-fall—a log armed with a poisoned stake hung up precariously in the branches above.

The fruits of the forest are doled out by nature with a sparing hand; they are infinite in their variety but sparse in their occurrence; the vast trees which fight their way through to light and air and life leave small chance for fruit-bearing trees to live. Yet some of the vines bear fruit, and it is possible to drag the flexible stems down, tearing them from their hold on the trunks, until the fruit is in reach. The amoma bears a watery fruit with a bitter kernel—either is of some use to fill an empty belly. A giant species of acacia bears pods of beans with indigestible skins, yet which nevertheless can be bruised and pounded and cooked into food. There are wild plums—tart leathery things—which can be found where soil conditions do not allow the trees to grow so tall; wild mangoes, woody and untempting; phrynica; even some of the bamboos which grow in the marshy spots bear berries which can be eaten and will support life.

With all these things Loa and the others had some sort of acquaintance, largely acquired when young; wandering as infants on the

edge of the clearing the ceaseless appetite of childhood had been gratified between meals by the gleanings of the forest. Loa knew less about them than any of the others, for he had had a pampered childhood as a god almost from birth. One thing he did know, and that was that it was not by standing still that food was to be found in the forest.

'Food?' he said to Musini in reply to her remark to Nessi. 'We shall find it as we go along.'

He took the little axe from her hand and picked up the pole which had so recently joined him to Nessi. A few blows and a jerk parted one fork from the stem. The links of chain dangled from the other fork and made a clumsy, flail-like weapon, but a weapon, nevertheless. He brandished it with a feeling of satisfaction and gave back the axe to Musini.

'Let us go,' he said.

'Which way, Lord?' asked Musini instantly, and Loa stared round down the twilight avenues between the trees with some uncertainty.

'It was this way that we came,' said Lanu. 'You can see the tracks. That leads to the path you were following with the grey-faced men.'

'That is the way we shall go,' said Loa. 'They will have gone far onward by the time we reach the path again.'

And with that, with so little ceremony, they began their vast and precarious journey. It was as well that Lanu made his explanation regarding the tracks, for Loa's unskilled eye could see nothing on the monotonous leaf-mould. Even Lanu's sharp eyes were put to a severe test, as the profuse rains at dawn had gone far to obliterate the heavy traces they had left in their flight from the slavers. Lanu went in front, his bow and arrow ready for instant action; the others spread out behind him, looking about them as they walked seeking something—anything—that would relieve in small measure the pangs of hunger that afflicted them the moment they admitted to themselves that they were hungry. Musini found a cluster of fine white mushrooms, and she brought the largest to Loa. It was wonderful to set one's teeth in the firm white flesh, to taste the keen pungent flavour of the raw mushroom, to swallow it down into a stomach that complained bitterly of being empty. Other finds

of Musini's she shared with Lanu. Nessi plodded along by herself; what she found went into her own stomach.

They came to the boggy stream which they had crossed yesterday in their flight, the leaf-mould under their feet grew less and less resilient, and water oozed out of it as they trod, and soon Lanu turned back towards them in despair.

'I do not know where we went,' he said pathetically. 'I can see no more.'

He had been proud to guide them up to this moment, and now he was pitifully aware of his shortcomings, no longer a pert young man, but a child again. And once more the all looked at Loa, while round them the silent forest waited for his decision.

'I will tell you which way we shall go,' said Loa—he said it to comfort Lanu more than for any other reason for he had no plan in his mind at that moment.

He looked round him at the silent trees, at the glades opening up around him. He could not think while he looked at them, and so he pressed his fists against his eyes as a stimulus to thought, pressed them firmly in as he used to do when he was a god and had a decision to make. The turning lights before his eyes were not disturbing like those silent glades. His mind grappled with the problem, to beat it down by sheer strength like an unpractised giant overpowering a skilled lightweight wrestler. Seeping through this bog was a little river, a childish version of the big river wherein his sister the moon was wont to hide herself. The superstitions of his lifetime warred with the hard logic inculcated by his recent experiences, for his first tendency was to think of the little stream as being endowed with human-like qualities, as being likely to wander here and there in accordance with its own whim, stopping if it saw fit, going on or going back if it saw fit. But he made himself realize that rivers run eternally in the same way, that some unchangeable law made them do so, just as water would always run out of a tilted bowl. A weak mortal—or an unguided god, for Loa was not quite ready to admit his mortality to himself—might wander in the forest in a thousand directions with no definition of route at all. But a stream must flow from somewhere to somewhere. It at least had a unity of purpose a human could not display.

'Where is the water?' he asked of Lanu, taking his hands from his eyes.

'It is here, my father,' said Lanu.

'Lord,' interposed Musini, correcting him.

'No,' said Loa. 'We are men together, and I am father of Lanu.'

Lanu's delighted grin was ample reward for the condescension the fondness of Loa's heart had evoked. They plodded through the mud to where the little stream lay between its flat banks; the trees met above it, and all about them their black and naked roots twined over the mud. Loa plucked a fragment of bark from a tree trunk and dropped it into the centre of the stream while the others breathlessly awaited his decision. The current here was hardly perceptible, but very slowly the bit of bark moved with the water relative to the bank; Loa was watching it as intently as he had ever watched the heaped rib-bones in the firelight. He noted the motion, and looked downstream to where the little river lost itself to view amid the trees.

'That is the way we shall go,' he said.

He said it with all his natural authority; he made no attempt to analyse the motives that had brought about this decision. Enough confidence in his powers still lingered with him for him to feel that whatever he might be guided to do must be right. And he was sustained in his confidence by the reception given to his decision by the others. They were lost in the forest, uneasy, aimless, and their misgivings had returned with redoubled force when Lanu had lost the track. It was intensely reassuring to them for someone to set them on the move again in accordance with some definite plan, any plan, especially when they could feel that Loa's supernatural powers would ensure that it was a good plan. It raised them from depression to something better than resignation, and started them again upon their vast journey with new strength.

CHAPTER

10

THERE WERE ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES ABOUT FOLLOWING the course of the sluggish stream through the forest. The marshy nature of the soil altered the prevailing character of the trees; they were not quite so monstrous, so that the smaller species had a chance of survival; there were woodbeans and amomato to be found, and the marshes contained numbers of bullfrogs, big creatures, which could be caught if the four wanderers formed a wide circle, hip deep in the ooze. The thighs of a dozen frogs, torn from the wretched creatures while they were still alive, and eaten raw, would have constituted a fair meal even for a man of Lea's vast appetite, but they unfortunately never caught even a dozen between them. But if the problem of food was rendered easier, the problem of travel was rendered harder. Inexplicably here and there the forest would yield altogether to growth of another sort, to belts of small trees and tangled undergrowth. The change would at first be imperceptible; the undergrowth would close round them insidiously like some wary enemy, and they would recognize the nature of the country too late to turn back, too late even to turn aside, for the extent of the belt on either hand could not be guessed at. Then there would be nothing to do save to plunge forward, stooping under, climbing over, hacking a path when necessary, gratefully following a game track when one presented itself for a few yards, in an atmosphere yet more steamy and still than among the tall trees, and far more noticeable because of the increased physical exertion necessary to make progress. Even where the vegetation was far too thick for the sky to be seen, they plunged along through suffocating twilight until at last the slow disappearance of undergrowth, an increase in the height of the trees, and eventually the welcome feeling of leafmould underfoot told them that they were through

the obstacle. In these struggles Loa, axe in hand, would lead, with Nessi following him and Lanu following her, and Musini bringing up the rear.

It was vastly difficult to retain any sense of direction in that kind of jungle, but they learned that it was a help for them all to echo a cry by Loa, who, hearing the shouts behind him, could judge the direction in which the little column was pointing, and that would help him a little to correct his own new direction. His instincts were sound enough to save him from ever becoming completely reversed as to his orientation while in the undergrowth; on emergence once more into the dark groves a cast to the right (they were following down the left bank of the stream) would eventually-- although sometimes only after a long and despairing journey-- bring them back to the boggy borders of the river. It was impossible to stay close to the water's edge; the boggiess, the sharp roots in the mud, even the leeches which lived there in great numbers, prohibited that.

They were lean with their exertions-- the once well-rounded Nessi was lean, so that every rib could be counted, and her breasts shrunk and her hip bones clearly apparent; and they were all scratched and cut so that their bodies were covered with healing scars and open wounds. They had purulent sores where ticks had burrowed into their skins or where the bites of black ants had become infected, and yet they went on through the forest from dawn until dark every day, for twelve hours each day, and no question arose among them of ceasing this monstrous labour. They were still faced with the same alternative, that to halt meant to reconcile their minds to permanent settlement here in the forest, while to go on meant still cherishing the hope of eventually reaching 'home.' And in Loa's mind there were still some residual traces of his confidence in himself as a god. Something within himself told him to push on downstream, and nothing occurred to make him doubt this inward inspiration, which drove him eternally onward and carried his followers with him.

Yet he was by no means the perfect leader, for he was not nearly as skilled in the details of forest life as were the others. He was dependent on them to such an extent that it seems likely that had he been alone he would have starved. He could not recognize

sources of food nearly as quickly as the others could; Musini did much to feed him, and even Lanu contributed, vaguely amused at this big father of his who was so incompetent in some ways. He could not make fire—Musini and Lanu were expert at it, and could produce a flame in less than fifteen minutes of work if the materials were not hard to find. They needed a lump of a softish wood, and a foot long stick of hard wood, and some handfuls of the rotting fibre pulled from under the bark of a fallen tree. They would loop the string of Lanu's bow round the stick, and then restrung the bow. Musini pressed the end of the stick firmly into the block of wood while Lanu moved the bow from side to side, rotating the stick rapidly against the block, cutting a short shallow groove into its grain. As the groove grew hot, Musini, still pressing the stick hard against the block, would take a handful of dry fibre and cram it round the rotating point, pressing it down into the groove. The fibre grew hot, the sparks were caught in it, and soon Musini bent to blow into the handful, coaxing it into a glow that could with skilful management be transferred to light dry wood kept ready to hand. It was a series of operations with which Musini had long been familiar, and which she carried out with the skill of long practice. With the fire so obtained they could toast into digestibility the wood beans gathered during the day, and anything they might have in the nature of meat could be cooked on long sticks. The smell of the fire, the smoke by day and the flame by night, would reveal their position to the little people, but that was a risk they had to take. So far they had seen nothing of them except their handiwork—the poisoned skewers in the trails, and the deadfalls overhanging them.

In the lighting of fires, in most of the hunting for food, Loa was of less use than Musini and Lanu, even less than Nessi. He was both inexperienced and ignorant; it was as if in these practical affairs of daily life his wife and child accorded him a good humoured toleration, even a tolerant contempt. He was to be reverently followed implicitly in matters the others knew nothing about, such as the route they should follow, but when it came to digging out white ants, or toasting frogs' legs on a stick before a fire, he was demonstrably less capable than they. Lanu would sigh with a resignation prematurely adult, but Musini was even capable of

shoving Loa aside. Loa was content to let it be so, for it did not lessen his opinion of himself—it did not even change it—that he should be unable to carry out duties always relegated to boys and women. He was content to squat and think his ponderous thoughts while the women might busy themselves, while Lanu might address himself to shaping a new arrow, chipping and whittling with his little axe, rubbing down on a stone, braiding the binding for the head out of creeper fibres. Loa could squat and meditate, and eat the food they gave him, while Musini harassed Nessi as always with her sharp tongue. At night he slept in Musini's loving but skinny arms.

It was ironical in consequence that Loa obtained for them one of the best meals they had. He was walking through the forest carrying his flail, the long pole that had once been his yoke, with the links of iron chain dangling from it, when he disturbed the black snake. Seven feet long it was, as thick nearly as a man's thigh, one of the largest specimens of the most deadly inhabitant of the forest. Loa saw the snake just in time and stopped, the snake was coiled, ready to defend itself, not seeking to strike needlessly, its eyes glaring coldly back at him. Loa stood as still as a statue, with every muscle tense, and then at last he stepped aside to circle round the thing. The black snake, coldly confident in its power, turned its flat head to watch him. Yet there was a second when Loa had an opening, and Loa seized the opportunity. He struck like lightning with his flail, muscle and eye co-ordinating with the exactitude of a primitive man's, his prodigious strength swinging his weapon at a speed equal to the snake's. The iron links struck into the snake just behind the head, probably disabling the creature at that single blow, but Loa struck again and again and again at the coils as they straightened and bent, not ceasing until his arms were weary and the sweat was running down him in rivers. Before him the snake still moved, its unco-ordinated segments heaving although its back was broken in a dozen places. Loa raised his voice in a shout of triumph which brought the others running to him, to look down from a safe distance at the dying death. With his flail Loa carefully poked the head free from the coils—the mouth still gaped and shut—and pounded it into an unrecognizable mass, and even then he was not satisfied until he had taken the little axe and severed the shattered

head from the body. He did so with another exultant shout, in which the others joined.

Here was food in plenty, pounds and pounds of it, and none of your belly-aching beans at that, but meat, rich, delightful meat. They camped on the spot; they lit a fire, and Lanu went to work with his axe, skinning the creature as well as he could and hacking it into vast collops—disregarding its slight writhing at each blow—which soon were *frizzling* over the fire and giving out a savour that brought the water into Loa's mouth as he waited. He burned his fingers, calloused though they were, as he seized the hot meat when it was given him, he burned his mouth as he bit into it. Juicy meat, fit food for a god; his big white teeth tore the meat from the bones and he swallowed it down with unmatched pleasure. And when that was finished there was another collop ready to be eaten, and after that another so that the first pleasure of gratifying a fierce appetite blended with the next of eating steadily to fill an empty stomach, and from that he could progress to the next wonderful step of packing tight a stomach already comfortably full. To eat although he felt he could eat no more was a gratification of the mind acutely pleasurable after so long of never enough to eat. He ceased to squat, unable to bear longer the pressure of his thighs against his bulging belly. He lay on his side to eat his last collop, and he feebly let fall the last fragments, lying out straight and enjoying the perverse pleasure of the pain of over-eating. He groaned in delightful agony.

It was that night that Loa added Nessi to his long list of wives, and presumably it was because that night he was filled with meat. Ura had been Nessi's husband, but Ura was most likely dead, and Nessi's child was dead, and it was likely that Nessi was a piece of property left without any owner at all, and in that case Loa was entitled to inherit, as he always did in similar circumstances. That was the only way in which a widow could come into anyone's hands who was not a relation, but it was perfectly legal and not unprecedented; but Loa had no thoughts about legality or precedents, and neither, it is to be feared, had Nessi, when Loa reached out his big arms to her in the faint light of the dying fire. It was a plain ebullition of animal spirits; for both of them it was a strange contrast after having been attached to each other for so long by a five-foot

pole—that added a fierce savour to their embrace—and for Loa there was the added contrast of Nessi's gentle submission after Musini's more exacting affection.

Next morning Musini was more bitter of tongue and chiding than ever, and Nessi was pert and inclined to be disrespectful to her, tossing her head at some request of Musini's. Musini darted a glance at Loa to see what his reaction would be, but Loa was experienced in the ways of rival wives—he was especially experienced in Musini's behaviour in these conditions—and he blandly ignored the whole incident. He had no intention of being involved in any arguments, and he acted as if he was completely unaware of any friction at all. He took his flail and started off on the day's march; the ants during the night had made a clean sweep of the remaining fragments of the snake, so that only white bones remained round the ashes of the fire, and already he was hungry, perhaps as a result of his exertions in the night. Certainly he was thirsty; he scooped up handfuls of water from the stream when he walked down to it, and drank them with eagerness, and then he set his face downstream on the two coincident businesses of the day, to find that day's food and to go on towards home—if indeed home lay in that direction. And Nessi stayed close at his side, all that day and all that night.

The sky, unseen above the tops of the trees, was disturbed. Day after day in the late evening the thunder would roll deafeningly, the flashes of lightning were bright enough to illuminate the forest so that the tree trunks could momentarily be seen, and the rain came streaming down in an abundance that spared nothing and no one, causing Loa and his followers hideous discomfort. The little people, in their normal life in the forest, used to counter this difficulty by erecting huts of phrynium leaves, temporary encampments which gave them shelter for several days before they were driven to move on by the consumption of the local food supply, but Loa's people had not the trick of it, and in any case never allowed themselves time before nightfall for any such labour. They had to endure their discomfort, changing their positions on the chilly wet leaf-mould, shifting back hurriedly when some alteration in conditions above them, some gust of wind perhaps, let loose a torrent of water, falling as if squirted from a hose, upon naked skin, down through the roaring darkness. It meant sore heads and bad tempers in the

morning, accentuating the nagging ill humour of Musini and the stubborn defiance of Nessi. Even Lanu was at times peevish and irritable, despite his perennial pride in doing man's work; and if the rain came on unusually early, making it impossible to light a fire at which to cook the wood-beans they had gathered during the day, it meant going to bed supperless, and an early halt next day to enable them to satisfy their consuming hunger.

Yet there were days when there was compensation for their hardship. They were struggling through one of the stretches of forest where the growth grew thick, where above them the roof of greenery grew thin so as at times even to let through shafts of actual sunlight, when Lanu raised his voice in a high-pitched squeal, soaring up, up, up nearly to the pitch of a bat's squeak.

'Plantains! Plantains! Real plantains!' squealed Lanu.

'Never!' said Loa; that was his immediate reaction to the suggestion that plantains might be found growing in the virgin forest, but he checked himself when he remembered that Lanu might still be a child in years but was a man in the forest.

'Plantains!' cried Musini as Loa made his way through the undergrowth towards them.

So they were; desirable hands of fruit, each plantain almost the size of a man's forearm, many of them verging upon ripeness. Loa and Musini and Lanu and Nessi when she straggled up to them, stood and gazed at them hanging close above their heads, dappled with sunshine.

'People have lived here,' declared Musini. 'This was a garden.'

It seemed the only possible theory. The tangled jungle about them, of saplings and creepers, had until recently been a town clearing, and the trees had not yet grown sufficiently tall, and the parasites not sufficiently numerous, to destroy the plantain trees. The plantain in its Central African form is a product of civilization, which can only live with the help of man, who must fell the trees and root up the creepers to give it breathing space; the moment man's attention lapses, the forest crowds in again to suffocate the plantain. Normally a clearing will provide two or three crops before the exhaustion of the soil makes it desirable to make a fresh clearing and replant the plantain suckers. But this could not be an exhausted clearing, for here were the plantains in full bearing. And that mass of vegetation

over there, Loa realized, of tangled vine and gay orchids, must be the stump of a felled tree, buried already under parasites, and yet not felled too long ago. There was no word in Loa's vocabulary for 'year' or 'month,' living as he did on the Equator where there was never any change of season, but he guessed that that tree could not have been felled at most more than two fruitings of the plantain ago. But where were the men who had felled the tree? He wrinkled his forehead momentarily over the puzzle before he put it aside to indulge himself in the pleasurable knowledge that here were plantains ripe for eating.

Lanu and he hacked a clearing in the steamy undergrowth, felling and dragging aside saplings and creepers alike, so that he could look up and see blue sky above him, a hole in the greenery which had roofed him in for so many days, over the edge of which his brother the sun glared down at him brassily. Loa saluted him with fraternal affection. The habits of thought of a lifetime were not so easily cast aside; whatever doubts Loa entertained regarding his being a god, he still could not see the sun without an instinctive family feeling. Here there was plenty of young sappy wood for the gratings before the fire on which plantains could be cooked, and Musini and Nessi prepared the food, not without the usual friction. Nothing Nessi did seemed to satisfy Musini, and nothing Musini said pleased Nessi. But the plantains were delicious. All their lives they had been accustomed to a diet in large part of bananas, and a return to them after all this time was gratifying. Loa, gulping down the starchy things, never spared a thought for the old days when he had complained bitterly about being given bananas for dinner. He ate with contentment, and Lanu, squatting beside him, ate with relish.

It was not merely a meal for to-day; the bananas would provide a meal for to-morrow and the day after, for, split in two and roasted before the fire, they shrank into leathery morsels that could be pressed together into lumps which could at least sustain life. With the certain prospect of two days' food before them, they were raised infinitely above the status of nomads living from meal to meal, and they were all vaguely conscious of their bettered station in life, temporary though it might be. At the thought of the temporary nature of the change Loa felt a tiny temptation. Here were bananas,

the staff of life. It was open to them to stay where they were, forever, to make a fresh clearing, to build themselves houses, to begin a new town. But he put the temptation aside without even considering it and without even knowing he had been tempted. He was going 'home,' and the difficulties he had encountered so far in the forest made no difference to his resolution.

'We need more plantains,' said Musini. 'Come, Nessi.'

The two women left Loa and Lanu sitting together. Lanu was preparing a bow for his father out of one of the saplings they had cut; he was shaping the stave with his little axe, fining it down progressively towards the ends, with many a careful look along the length of it to make sure he was keeping it balanced.

'A big bow this will be, my father,' he said. 'The cord will have to be tough for you to draw it to the full.'

'Musini will prepare the cord, and then your father will draw it,' said Loa, the contentment arising from a stomach full of plantains making him drowsy. Night was gathering for its final rush upon them, and he was ready to sleep.

'I sent an arrow to-day,' gossiped Lanu, 'against a bird beside the stream. Grey and white he was in colour. Oh, how he flew back into the trees when my arrow went past him! My arrow plunged into the marsh and I lost it--a good arrow it was, too. When I have finished this bow I must make many more, both for you and for me.'

He chipped away delicately with the axe at the bow stave; the fine steel took off the shavings as neatly as could be desired. Lanu, squatting with the bow between his knees, was an epitome of mankind. He was using steel and making a bow, two of the greatest inventions which have brought about man's material progress. But more than that; he was making a bow not for instant use, but against a future need, displaying that thought for the morrow which enables man to rise superior to the animals about him. And also he had not invented the bow, he was copying what he had seen other men doing, making use of tradition whereby every generation can rise superior to the preceding one. Tools, forethought, and tradition made the history of man's advance, and the boy with the axe and the bow exemplified all of them.

Musini came quietly back with a hand of bananas on her back,

and squatted down to peel them and dry them at the glowing fire; Lanu gave her a moment's attention as he worked on the bow.

'We shall need a long stout cord for this bow, my mother,' he said.

'I will make it,' she answered quietly. She licked her fingers to keep them from burning, and began to turn the bananas on the wooden grill.

'I could eat more now,' said Lanu, and Musini handed him a hot plantain without demur, and brought one to Loa when he held out his hand.

The minutes passed as they ate and worked and gossiped; Loa found himself nodding off in the darkness as sleep crept upon him.

'It is dark now,' he said. 'Where is Nessi?'

Musini came over to him from out of the faint light of the fire.

'Do you always want Nessi, Lord?' she asked softly. 'Here am I, the mother of Lanu, and here is your bed which I have prepared of banana leaves. Think no more about Nessi to-night.'

Loa was too well fed and sleepy to question the arrangement.

'Lord,' whispered Musini in the darkness, 'I—I—am your servant.'

That was a declaration of consuming love in the limited vocabulary of Musini and Loa. A leopard snarled frightfully in the treetops not far off, and the monkeys he was stalking chattered and bustled in affright, and the sound of their terrified movements came down to the unhearing ears below. Then simultaneously came the last frantic shriek of a stupefied monkey who had fled along a branch within reach of the waiting leopard, and the triumphant howl of the leopard as his iron claws closed upon it. Then there was silence through the forest.

And in the morning Nessi was not with them, although so assiduously did Musini attend to their wants that her absence was not forcibly called to their attention. Musini found embers in the remains of the fire, and blew them into a glow. She toasted a fresh supply of bananas for their morning meal. She wrapped fresh leaves round the bananas she had dried the night before, and she bound them with creepers to make the bundles easy to carry. Loa heaved himself up a little stiffly in the wet morning air, and only now did he bring thought to bear on the subject of Nessi's absence. It